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The most distant corridors at Tonglu General Hospital were sometimes quiet in the very early hours. The floor shone beneath the hard dominion of the fluorescents; and, from time to time, a pair of sneakers, hurrying on some errand, made an unseemly squeak. Xie Lian pressed a sticky note flat with the heel of his hand, smoothed it once, and contemplated his small duty done properly.

He consulted his watch. If he moved quickly, there would be time for tea before his shift began.

"Coming through. Make way!"

The cry was scarcely made before something heavy struck him from behind. He tried to recover his balance, but his body turned the wrong way, and met the floor bluntly. For an instant there was only the shock of impact and empty breath.

"Oh my god—oh my god—I'm so sorry!"

A face floated into view above him, blurred at first by the brightness of the ceiling lights. Feng Xin from OB/GYN. Horror came first, then recognition, and then something of pity and mild dread.

"Sir?" he said, stiff all at once. "Uh… are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Xie Lian assured him. He tried to sit up; but pain shot through his ankle and he couldn't restrain a wince.

"You're injured," Feng Xin said.

Mu Qing was there also with the gurney they had been pushing. He rolled his eyes impatiently and muttered, "Just help him up."

Feng Xin obeyed awkwardly. When Xie Lian's right foot refused the floor, Feng Xin himself winced as if its twisting offended him.

"I was just—we were—" Feng Xin gestured helplessly at the

gurney, then at Xie Lian. “I should probably take you down to the ER.”

“That’s really not necessary,” Xie Lian began; but Feng Xin, having once resolved on his course, did not listen well. He was already settling Xie Lian into a wheelchair. “Hospital policy,” he said.

They went to the ER without talking. Feng Xin cleared his throat a few times like he wanted to say something but thought better of it each time. When they reached the hallway, he helped Xie Lian onto an empty gurney.

“I’ll just… find someone to take a look,” Feng Xin said, and then left.

Xie Lian looked at his ankle. It was swelling and it hurt when he touched it. He wondered briefly whether he could manage mopping on crutches.

A young man in scrubs with a tablet hurried past, then stopped and backed up.

“Mr. Xie?” He was Yin Yu, Dr. Hua Cheng’s scribe. Xie Lian saw him most mornings in the trauma wing. “What happened to you?”

“Just a little accident in the hallway,” Xie Lian said. “Nothing serious.”

Yin Yu’s eyes went to the ankle. “You’re injured,” he said. Then, remembering something, added, “Does Dr. Hua know you’re here?”

“There’s no need to bother San Lang,” Xie Lian began, but Yin Yu was already retreating, tablet clamped to his chest.

“I’ll be right back,” he vowed.

Xie Lian sighed. Fuss would come.

Less than two minutes later, Yin Yu returned, breathing hard, and Hua Cheng followed behind unruffled. He wore dark red scrubs and had his surgical cap on. It looked like he had just come from a procedure, or was about to go into one.

"Gege," he said. He took hold of the gurney and began pushing it toward a private corner of the ER.

Yin Yu walked next to him, nervous and attentive, glancing at Xie Lian. "I found him here alone," he said. "Dr. Feng from OB/GYN left him."

"Did he now," Hua Cheng said mildly.

"San Lang, you didn't need to come yourself," Xie Lian insisted as they went into an empty exam room. "You were probably busy with something important."

"Nothing is more important," Hua Cheng said. He positioned the gurney, then looked at Yin Yu. "Thank you for telling me."

Yin Yu nodded quickly and disappeared, closing the door behind him.

In the private room, Hua Cheng's attention, which a moment before had been divided among doors and corridors, turned wholly upon Xie Lian, and he moved at once to examine the injured ankle, as if this small thing were now the only business in the world.

"Gege, you hurt yourself again." He shook his head. "What am I going to do with you?"

In spite of the pain that throbbed and pricked, Xie Lian couldn't help smiling. "It wasn't my fault this time, San Lang. I was just standing there."

"Mm, sure," Hua Cheng hummed. "Gege attracts trouble like a magnet attracts metal. It's a special talent."

"I think Feng Xin might be aiming for me," Xie Lian said, trying to make light of it; but he winced when Hua Cheng's fingers,

in searching for the tender place, found it.

"Sorry," Hua Cheng murmured, and gentled his hands. "If he was, I'll have to thank him later."

"San Lang!"

"What? It's not every day I get to see my favorite carpooling buddy during work hours."

It was their routine—simple and settled: Xie Lian would pick Hua Cheng up each morning, drive them both to the hospital, and then bring him home when their shifts were finished. Hua Cheng's missing eye meant he could not drive, as it had been explained to Xie Lian by another surgeon.

"I can still work," he insisted.

Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow. "With this ankle? I don't think so, gege." He set the foot down gently and reached for a nearby tablet. "You've got a moderate sprain. Nothing broken. But you'll need to stay off it for a few days—elevate it, ice it—you know the drill."

"But my shift—the east wing still needs cleaning, and I promised the nurses in pediatrics I'd fix that squeaky door—"

"Which will be covered," Hua Cheng closed the matter. "I'll speak to maintenance myself."

Xie Lian sighed and leaned back against the gurney. He took pride in his work, in doing it thoroughly and without anyone having to ask twice. The hospital might see him as only a janitor, but he knew, plainly, how much proper sanitation and staffing mattered in a medical environment.

"Fu Yao can probably cover most of it," he conceded. "But he'll need my master keys, and they're in my locker."

Hua Cheng nodded and made a note on the tablet. "I'll have Yin Yu retrieve them." He fixed Xie Lian with a look. "You're

staying off that foot for the rest of the day. After work, we can get dinner."

"I can just wait in the break room," Xie Lian offered. "The maintenance staff has one in the basement."

Distaste passed across Hua Cheng's face. "You'll rest in the surgeons' lounge until I'm finished."

"San Lang, I can't go there. That's for surgeons…"

"You are a surgeon, aren't you?"

"*Used* to be."

"Well," Hua Cheng said, "I'm a surgeon who happens to be bringing a guest, then." And he called for Yin Yu, who appeared so promptly that Xie Lian couldn't help thinking he'd been hovering just beyond the door the whole time. "Yin Yu, please get a wheelchair. And then get Xie Lian's keys from his locker—"

"East wing, locker 37, combination 8-17-20," Xie Lian supplied.

"—and deliver them to Fu Yao in facilities."

Yin Yu said, "Yes, Dr. Hua," and vanished at once.

"San Lang, really, the basement break room is fine," Xie Lian said. "I use it every day—"

"Which is exactly why you shouldn't have to use it today," Hua Cheng cut him off. "You're injured. You deserve comfort."

Before Xie Lian could gather another protest, Yin Yu returned with a wheelchair. Hua Cheng helped him transfer.

"I have a patient to check on," Hua Cheng said, adjusting the footrest to elevate Xie Lian's ankle. "Yin Yu will take you to the lounge and get you settled. I'll join you when I can."

He squeezed Xie Lian's shoulder and the red of his scrubs disappeared around the corner.

Yin Yu pushed Xie Lian through hallways he rarely crossed unless he had a mop and bucket in his hands. The floors looked cleaner here, and the air smelled less like bleach than in the emergency room. They took an elevator to the fourth floor, where the surgical department occupied a quiet, pristine wing.

Dr. Hua was very specific about making sure he was comfortable, Yin Yu explained as they moved down the hallwayz Hua Cheng had asked Yin Yu to bring him anything he might need.

"This really isn't necessary," Xie Lian said, and in hearing his voice, felt increasingly out of place as they passed doctors in crisp white coats. They looked at him with brief, curious glances reserved for anomalies.

"Dr. Hua said you might say that," Yin Yu replied. "He also said to ignore you."

They stopped at a door marked SURGICAL STAFF ONLY. Inside were plush couches and recliners arranged around a large-screen television. A kitchenette gleamed with brushed stainless steel Viking appliances, their surfaces immaculate, as if no human hand had ever dared leave a print there. A row of lockers stood against one wall, and several doors led off to shower rooms and changing areas that looked too clean to have ever witnessed sweat, blood, or exhaustion.

Once Xie Lian was settled, Yin Yu brought him a pillow, a blanket, an ice pack, and a remote control for the television.

"There's a mini-fridge with drinks," Yin Yu said, "and I'll have lunch brought to you. Is there anything else you need?"

"This is already far too much," Xie Lian said, overwhelmed. "I have a perfectly good break room in the basement where the maintenance staff—"

"Dr. Hua specifically said you'd mention the basement break

room," Yin Yu interrupted. "He also said, and I quote, 'Tell gege absolutely not.'"

"But it's completely adequate," Xie Lian protested.

"Is it?" came a new voice from the doorway.

Shi Qingxuan, one of the hospital's social workers, stood there, eyebrows raised. The room tightened around his bluntness.

"The maintenance break room is a glorified closet with a microwave that smells like someone died in it," Shi Qingxuan said.

"Qingxuan," Xie Lian said with a small smile.

"Xie-ge!" Shi Qingxuan bounded into the room. "Finally getting the VIP treatment you deserve! Do you know how long I've been telling administration we need to renovate your break room? Months of filing requests, and they still haven't fixed that leaky pipe."

"It adds character," Xie Lian replied. "Besides, we don't need anything fancy. Just somewhere to sit."

"See, this is why nothing changes," Shi Qingxuan sighed, throwing himself onto the couch opposite Xie Lian. "You're too nice. Remember when the surgical wing flooded a year ago and you spent thirty-six hours straight redirecting the water and salvaging equipment while administration was still debating whether to call an emergency plumber?"

"That was a year ago," Xie Lian demurred. "And so what? Anyone would have done the same."

"No, they wouldn't have," Shi Qingxuan countered. He turned to address an entering doctor. "Pei Ming, did you know our Xie-ge here is the reason the entire hospital got that massive HVAC upgrade five months ago?"

"Really?" Dr. Pei looked at Xie Lian with interest while haphazardly gnawing on a protein bar. "I thought that was because

the whole system catastrophically failed.”

“Oh, it did,” Shi Qingxuan said. “After Xie-ge tried to fix what was supposed to be a minor issue with the cooling system.”

Xie Lian groaned, covering his face. “Please don’t bring that up. It’s still humiliating.”

“It’s legendary!” Shi Qingxuan insisted. “He was trying to be helpful and save the hospital money on a repair call, adjusted one little valve—”

“And somehow caused a chain reaction that shorted out the entire electrical system in the east wing, and resulted in the complete shutdown of an HVAC system that had been running since the 1980s,” Xie Lian finished miserably. “Director Jun almost fired me on the spot.”

"But didn't," Shi Qingxuan pointed out. "Because Director Jun has always had a soft spot for you. Everyone knows you're his favorite."

Xie Lian denied it at once.

"It's true," Pei Ming chimed. "Why else would he keep you around after the Incident with the MRI machine? Or the time with the cafeteria grease trap? Or—"

"Alright, alright," Xie Lian interrupted hastily. "Maybe he's been... unusually forgiving. But I still had to work a month of night shifts without pay to make up for the HVAC disaster. And I'm still banned from touching anything more complicated than a light switch."

“Regardless,” Pei Ming said, gesturing around the surgeons’ lounge, “now you’ve seen how the other half lives. You're moving up in the world.” His gaze moved over Xie Lian, then the door. "Though I'm surprised Hua Cheng is the first one who brought you up here. He's only been at Tonglu for what, six months?"

“Five and a half,” Xie Lian corrected. “He transferred from

another hospital."

"And somehow already runs the trauma department," Pei Ming said.

"He's very talented," Xie Lian said simply.

"Oh, we know," Shi Qingxuan grinned. "Especially since you remind everyone every chance you get. 'Dr. Hua is so skilled,' 'Dr. Hua saved another impossible case,' 'Dr. Hua performed a tracheotomy with a paperclip and chewing gum.'"

Xie Lian's cheeks warmed. "I don't sound like that."

"You do," Dr. Pei confirmed, sitting down. "Which is why the hospital rumor mill has been in overdrive since you two started carpooling. The janitor who's turned down three promotions to anything other than mopping, and the prodigy surgeon who terrifies residents. Quite the unlikely pair."

"Not so unlikely," Xie Lian said. "We happen to live in the same direction."

Shi Qingxuan hummed. "And that explains why he threatened to personally reorganize the entire hospital maintenance schedule when administration tried to change your shift last month?"

"He did what?" Xie Lian asked.

"Oh, you didn't know?" Shi Qingxuan said. "They wanted to move you to night permanently and Hua Cheng marched into Director Jun's office over it."

Xie Lian didn't have time to answer before food delivery arrived. The bag held steaming bao buns with pork filling—Xie Lian's favorite, though he couldn't remember ever mentioning it. There was also fresh fruit, jasmine tea, and a small dessert wrapped in a napkin.

"Well, you're certainly getting the VIP treatment," Shi

Qingxuan observed. “Hua Cheng doesn’t even let us eat in here most days.”

“He says the smell of Shi Qingxuan’s instant noodles offends his surgical sensibilities,” Pei Ming explained. “Though I don’t know why a social worker is in our lounge so often anyway.”

“I provide emotional support to your patients,” Shi Qingxuan replied, flipping his hair. “And occasionally to you surgeons, though you’re all hopeless cases.”

“No arguments.” Hua Cheng guided him back to the couch, helped him down, and with great care, arranged the injured foot upon cushions.

He Xuan watched this with an expression unable to settle into any single feeling, then cleared his throat.

“I apologize if I came across as… unwelcoming,” he said, stiffly.

"Dr. He has been on call for thirty-six hours," Hua Cheng told Xie Lian. "His social skills deteriorate exponentially after twenty."

“I’m sitting right here,” He Xuan muttered.

“I know.” Hua Cheng fixed his attention on He Xuan. “Did you need something from the lounge?”

“I was eating,” He Xuan said, and indicated his cup of noodles.

“Finish quickly, then.”

He Xuan lifted an eyebrow, but offered no reply. He swiveled in his chair while he chased the last few noodles at the bottom of the cup, which clung stubbornly to the cardboard. The chair protested with a quiet squeak each time he turned—slowly clockwise, then back again—so that the sound measured out in small, irritating increments.

Hua Cheng sat on the edge of the couch beside Xie Lian. “How's the pain?”

“Manageable,” Xie Lian said.

“Liar,” Hua Cheng replied fondly. He reached into his pocket and produced an ibuprofen bottle. “Take two.”

Xie Lian sighed and swallowed them with the water Hua Cheng handed him. It was a bottle of sparkling water—peach flavored. The detail was unnecessary, and therefore it remained with him.

“I have to get back to my patients,” Hua Cheng said. “But I’m serious about you staying here. Nobody will bother you.” His eye flicked toward He Xuan, who pointedly pretended not to notice.

“San Lang, I appreciate everything, but—”

“I’ll be back to check on you in an hour,” Hua Cheng said. Then he left.

After the door closed, an awkward quiet settled over the lounge. He Xuan worked on the remaining broth in his cup. Pei Ming resumed dictation, though his eyes strayed now and then toward Xie Lian, as if he expected more trouble to develop on its own.

“So,” He Xuan said flatly. “You used to be a doctor.”

Xie Lian blinked.

“Hua Cheng mentioned it to the department head last month,” He Xuan continued. “Something about your perspective on a case.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian shifted, uncomfortable at being spoken of rather than spoken to. “That was just… San Lang being kind.”

“Hua Cheng isn’t kind,” He Xuan stated. “Not to anyone but you, apparently.”

From the corner, Pei Ming snorted.

“That’s not true,” Xie Lian said. “He’s very professional.”

“Professional, yes. Kind, no.” He Xuan studied him. “What was your specialty?”

The question caught Xie Lian off guard. It had been years since anyone asked him that without irony. Most staff knew him only as the janitor who somehow managed to break whatever he touched. His attempts to help had a way of multiplying into larger incidents; there were departments with protocols bearing his name —printed, laminated, and taken seriously, the way one took seriously a recurring hazard.

“Neurosurgery,” he admitted after a moment. “In China. Before I moved here.”

Pei Ming’s head snapped up. “Wait—seriously? You were a neurosurgeon?”

Xie Lian nodded. “Yes. At Wuhan Union Hospital for several years.”

“And now you mop floors?” Pei Ming asked, still staring, incredulous in a straightforward way.

“Yes, now I mop floors,” Xie Lian replied. “And I'm perfectly content doing so.”

“But why didn’t you get relicensed here?” Pei Ming pressed. He sounded genuinely baffled, as if the answer ought to be obvious and yet wasn’t.

Xie Lian’s smile turned a little sad. “The process to practice medicine in America is complicated. Expensive. Time-consuming. When I first arrived, I needed work immediately; and by the time I was settled…” He shrugged. “Life moved on. Beginning medical school again from the start wasn’t practical.”

"That's a waste," He Xuan said bluntly.

“I don’t see it that way,” Xie Lian replied. “Every job has value. Clean hospitals save lives.”

He Xuan pushed off with one foot, sending his chair into another rotation. The squeak this time was so thin and piercing—not unlike a small rodent being slowly compressed between wheels—that it made Pei Ming wince mid-dictation.

“Hua Cheng knows, doesn’t he?” He Xuan asked, spinning lazily; motion helped him think. “About your background.”

The chair complained again with each quarter turn, persistent in its misery. *Squeeeak...*

Xie Lian had to resist the urge to offer the chair some oil, if only to quiet it. “He figured it out shortly after he started carpooling,” he said.

Squeeeeaaaaaak.

"And yet he hasn't told anyone else," He Xuan said.

Squeeeeaaaaaaaak.

"I asked him not to," Xie Lian said.

The chair uttered an especially plaintive cry as He Xuan completed another turn, and the sound was now so drawn-out and unnatural that it seemed less the protest of an object than a distressed pterodactyl.

Pei Ming at last broke. “For the love of—can you STOP with the chair? It sounds like you’re torturing a small animal under there.”

He Xuan looked down at the chair, as though only at that moment he perceived it, then looked up blankly. “No,” he said.

Squeeeeeeaaaaaaaaaak.

He Xuan studied Xie Lian for a moment longer, then nodded

as if reaching some private conclusion. "Interesting."

The conversation drifted to other topics after that: from the immediate discomfort to safer ground, from irritation to curiosity, from the day's accidents to the day's stories. Despite first unease, Xie Lian found himself listening, then answering; and he was surprised to discover that he did not wish to withdraw. They spoke of recent cases, of mishaps and recoveries, of the grotesque miracles that occurred daily behind closed doors. They spoke too of hospital gossip—names, feuds, promotions, the strange little reputations that clung to people more stubbornly than their badges.

Now and then He Xuan turned his heavy, sleepless gaze upon Xie Lian and asked about neurosurgical approaches to certain trauma cases. They were pointed, thoughtful, posed with genuine interest, as if Xie Lian's answers might be useful rather than merely surprising, and soon enough, Xie Lian had a napkin spread before him and a pen in his hand, sketching a diagram while both doctors watched. His drawing was not beautiful. The lines wavered; proportions were imperfect. But the important things were placed where they belonged, and the small annotations were clear enough to guide a hand.

"The tumour was a grade IV glioblastoma multiforme, located here," Xie Lian explained, and his finger traced a region on his rough cross-sectional view. "Deep-seated in the dominant temporal lobe, with tendrils extending into both Broca's and Wernicke's speech areas. It was also encasing branches of the middle cerebral artery."

He Xuan leaned forward. "Most neurosurgeons would declare that inoperable, or at best attempt a partial resection."

"That was the consensus," Xie Lian said, and nodded once. "The oncology board recommended palliative care only."

Pei Ming whistled low. "Expected survival—what? Three months without intervention?"

"Less," Xie Lian replied. "With that rate of progression. But the patient was only thirty-two, with young children. She wanted

any chance, no matter how small.”

“So what approach did you take?” He Xuan asked.

Xie Lian drew a curved line, then added another, as though the pen remembered the path of this old work of his. “I used an extended pterional approach with an additional temporal component, but the key was combining awake craniotomy with intraoperative direct electrical stimulation mapping and fluorescence-guided resection. I used 5-ALA to make the tumour fluoresce; it helped distinguish tumour tissue from normal brain. Then throughout the procedure, the patient performed language tasks while cortical function was mapped millimetre by millimetre.”

"And outcome?" He Xuan prodded.

"Transient expressive aphasia that resolved within two weeks," Xie Lian said. "She returned to work as a high school teacher four months later."

“Well,” Hua Cheng said, stepping into the room, “this is unexpected.”

“San Lang!” Xie Lian brightened, and he did not try to hide it. “We were just discussing that grade IV glioblastoma I told you about.”

"Were you?" Hua Cheng's eyes shifted to He Xuan, who met it without flinching.

"He has interesting perspectives," He Xuan said, shrugging. "For a janitor."

Pei Ming raised a hand, palm out, as if to stop the whole subject from continuing. “Wait, wait—my residency was ages ago, and I’ve been cutting other things since then.” He waved dismissively. “All this brain terminology is giving me a headache. Five-whatever-A? Speak a language the rest of us understand—or at least one I care to remember.”

Xie Lian laughed; and, for the first time, a sensation which

he had thought extinguished returned upon him. It was not that Hua Cheng had pronounced him welcome in this place, nor that any mandate could confer him a right to sit amongst these surgeons; but that, in the brief course of their conversation, and in the sober attention with which they listened, he found again the part of himself which he had supposed interred for ever. It was medicine; and the long-loved craft, spoken about aloud, warmed him.

Tonglu General Hospital's emergency department come evening resembled nothing so much as a tumultuous dance of confusion and reluctant order. Physicians and nurses moved in rapid succession between gurneys; instruments beeped and chimed; and the harsh voice of the overhead summons grated at intervals through the corridors, as though to remind all within that no peace was to be expected there.

Three days had elapsed since the gurney accident, and he'd returned to his duties, notwithstanding Hua Cheng's objections. An elastic bandage, concealed beneath his janitor's scrubs, afforded him sufficient support to make walking tolerable.

"Water leak in CT Three," the PA system called overhead.

Xie Lian knew that couldn't be right. It was far more probable that Shi Qingxuan had again spilled his bottle, and that some alarmed intern mistook the puddle for a problem.

With a sigh he altered his course towards radiology, but hadn't made it three steps when a hand caught his shoulder.

"Oh no you don't." Mu Qing stood behind him, arms crossed. "Nan Feng is already handling it."

"But I'm perfectly capable—"

"You're on light duty," Mu Qing cut him off. "Director Jun's orders. Or did you think your trauma surgeon boyfriend throwing a fit in administration went unnoticed?"

Heat rose to Xie Lian's cheeks. "San Lang is not my boyfriend," he said. "And he didn't throw a fit."

"He threatened to transfer to Mount Sinai if Director Jun didn't approve light duty," Mu Qing said. "The only reason you're allowed back at all is because Feng Xin and I promised to keep you from doing anything strenuous."

"That's ridiculous."

“Tell that to Dr. Hua,” Mu Qing muttered; and, taking Xie Lian by the elbow, steered him away from the corridor. “Come on. You can help me check stock. Even you can’t destroy the hospital doing that. Or—” he paused, as if reconsidering—“well, you might.”

“That was one time,” Xie Lian said, pained. “And the supply cart wasn’t properly secured on that incline—”

“And the avalanche of bedpans took out an entire row of IV poles,” Mu Qing finished, “which dominoed into the medication cart, which crashed into the nurses’ station computer, costing the hospital thirty thousand dollars in equipment and earning you the nickname 'The Janitor of Misfortune.'"

Xie Lian winced, and said nothing more.

They reached the central supply room. Mu Qing placed a clipboard into Xie Lian’s hands. “Inventory only. No lifting. No moving. Just counting and checking boxes.”

Xie Lian accepted it with a sigh.

“I’ll be back in an hour,” Mu Qing said. “Try not to cause a catastrophe before then.”

Before Xie Lian could object to this sentence, which was unjust, a commotion rose from the hall—voices raised, one particularly strident, striking the walls and returning upon themselves.

“I don’t care what your so-called schedule says! My patient needs that OR now!”

Mu Qing rolled his eyes. “Pei Ming is at it again.”

They looked out. Dr. Pei, red-faced and imposing, loomed over Ling Wen, who regarded him unfazed.

“As I’ve explained, Dr. Pei,” she said, “OR Three is booked for Dr. Shi’s facial reconstruction and has been for weeks. Your valve replacement can—”

“My patient has waited three months!” Pei Ming broke in. “Three months while insurance jerked us around! And now you want him to wait another day because Shi Wudu needs to perform cosmetic surgery that could wait until this afternoon?”

Ling Wen adjusted her glasses. “If you’d like to discuss the relative urgency of your procedures, I can page Dr. Shi to join us.”

“That won’t be necessary.” Pei Ming bristled. “Just tell him —”

“Tell me what?”

Shi Wudu emerged from around the corner, already capped. “Trying to steal my OR time again, Pei?”

“Your surgery can wait,” Pei Ming insisted. “My patient—”

“Has chronic issues that another day won’t exacerbate,” Shi Wudu finished, coolly.

Pei Ming scoffed. “A few more hours of waiting won’t make a difference to your pretty-face surgeries.”

Ling Wen lifted an eyebrow.

The dispute, swelling, threatened to occupy the whole corridor. Xie Lian retreated into the supply room. These territorial battles were common, and he'd learned to stay well out of the crossfire. He began his count, and the sounds of the argument diminished as it moved elsewhere.

The work was quiet, and Xie Lian lost himself in numbers, checking labels, and making marks. He'd nearly finished the first shelf when a voice from the doorway startled him so that his pen fell from his fingers.

“Hiding from the war zone?”

Hua Cheng leaned against the door frame, arms crossed. His crimson scrubs were striking against the white walls. Though he

must have come from a long procedure, he appeared perfectly composed; not a hair out of place beneath his cap.

“San Lang!” Xie Lian said. “I thought you were in surgery all morning.”

“Just finished one,” Hua Cheng replied. He pushed off the frame. His eye traveled over Xie Lian from head to foot. “How’s the ankle?”

“Much better,” Xie Lian said quickly. “It barely hurts at all.”

Too quickly; for Hua Cheng’s brow knit. “Is that why you’re favoring your left side?”

“Just being cautious,” Xie Lian answered, with a small, placating smile. “Besides, I’m on light duty. See?” He bent to retrieve his pen. “Just counting gauze pads and bedpans.”

“Hm.” Hua Cheng did not look convinced; yet he did not press further. Instead, he moved to the shelves and began calling out numbers for Xie Lian to mark down.

“You don’t have to help,” Xie Lian said. “I’m sure you have more important things to do.”

“Nothing more important,” Hua Cheng replied, “than making sure you don’t overexert yourself. Besides, I have a break.”

They worked in companionable silence for a few minutes; and the routine of it sat so naturally between them that it might have been supposed they'd long been accustomed to such employment side by side.

“I heard Pei Ming trying to steal OR time again,” Hua Cheng remarked.

“It’s becoming a weekly occurrence,” Xie Lian replied. “Though I’m surprised you’re not involved in the scheduling conflicts. The trauma department usually takes priority.”

“That’s because I fixed the system,” Hua Cheng said, with the slightest tincture of self-satisfaction. “I dedicated one OR exclusively to trauma, and set a rotating schedule for non-emergent cases that’s fair to all departments. It was that, or watch Pei Ming and Shi Wudu throttle each other in the hallway every week while I fight for my own time.” He shrugged, as if the matter were of no great moment. “Besides, it’s more efficient. Emergency cases don’t disrupt scheduled surgeries as often.”

Xie Lian looked impressed, but offered no further comment, and they returned to their work. Yet, even while he marked the numbers, Xie Lian found his eyes drawn, in spite of himself, to Hua Cheng. There was in that man, whose reputation made others cautious and silent, a gentleness: the manner in which he handled even trivial objects with care, as though nothing that served a purpose deserved contempt.

“By the way,” Hua Cheng said casually, pointing as he counted each suture kit, “my birthday is on Thursday.”

“It is?” Xie Lian’s eyes widened. “San Lang, you should have told me sooner. We should celebrate. We could go to hot pot, or—”

“I don’t need anything elaborate,” Hua Cheng interrupted, fixed on the inventory sheet. “I’ve never been one for big celebrations. But hot pot with gege does sound nice.”

“But we should do something special beyond hot pot,” Xie Lian insisted. “And what would you like as a gift?”

Hua Cheng was quiet for a moment. When he spoke again, his tone remained light, indifferent.

“Something handmade would be nice.”

“Handmade?” Xie Lian asked.

“Mm.” Hua Cheng at last looked up and met him. “I’ve always appreciated things made by hand.”

“Oh.” Xie Lian’s mind ran at once through possibilities, and

found none that did not end in embarrassment. What could he make that would be worthy of San Lang? His craft was about as reliable as his skill with machines, and that was to say: prone to accidents. The last time he had attempted to knit, he had produced a thing Feng Xin had described (rightly or wrongly) as an eldritch horror. "I'll… keep that in mind."

Hua Cheng smiled. "Don't worry too much about it, gege. Your company is gift enough."

Xie Lian's expression held; but within, he groaned. He hated that sentiment—*I'm the gift.* It sounded too pleased with itself, and too empty. A real gift would be better. San Lang deserved something tangible, something that showed forethought and labor, not merely Xie Lian's presence, which was given daily and cost him nothing but time.

Before he could give voice to any of this, Hua Cheng's pager shrilled.

"Multiple-vehicle accident on the highway," Hua Cheng said, moving toward the door. "The trauma team's being called in."

Xie Lian set down his clipboard. "I could help—maybe prepare the hallways for gurneys coming through—"

"Light duty," Hua Cheng reminded him. "Stay here and finish the inventory."

"But I could at least—"

"Promise me, gege."

Xie Lian hesitated, then yielded. "Fine. I promise."

With a quick nod, Hua Cheng was gone; and the red of his scrubs vanished down the corridor, leaving the room quieter than before.

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The cafeteria was relatively mellow when Xie Lian arrived. A few scattered staff members hovered over late lunches of questionable quality and sludgy consistency. He spied an empty table in the corner and made his way toward it, endeavoring not to limp too obviously.

“Xie-ge!”

Shi Qingxuan waved from a nearby table, his pink Stanley cup sloshing in hand. He was sharing lunch with He Xuan, who appeared about as pleased with the arrangement as a cat in a bathtub.

“Join us!” Shi Qingxuan patted the empty chair beside him. “He Xuan is being no fun today. Maybe you can liven things up.”

He Xuan didn't look up from his cup of instant noodles. “I’m working,” he said. “Not performing.”

“See what I mean?” Shi Qingxuan rolled his eyes.

Xie Lian hesitated, then went to their table. He'd intended to rest alone; but it seemed rude to refuse.

“How’s the ankle?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Better,” Xie Lian replied. “Just a bit sore when I put weight on it.”

“You shouldn’t be working at all, according to Hua Cheng,” He Xuan said.

“I tried telling him that,” said another voice, and Mu Qing appeared beside their table with a tray in hand. “But he’s incapable of sitting still.”

“That’s not true,” Xie Lian protested.

Mu Qing took the seat next to Xie Lian, pressing the matter no further.

The cafeteria doors swung open with force. Pei Ming strode in, scrub cap still on, and a self-satisfied smile fixed upon his face. He paused to wink at a group of nurses, who rolled their eyes in unison and returned to their conversation.

“Someone’s looking pleased with himself,” Shi Qingxuan remarked, tracking Pei Ming’s progress toward the food line.

“Successful valve replacement,” He Xuan supplied, tapping something into his phone. “I heard him bragging about it all morning. Apparently it was ‘technically challenging’ and ‘only someone of his caliber could have managed it.’”

“So,” Mu Qing said, picking at his salad, “another Tuesday.”

Ling Wen entered next, moving with long, decisive strides, two tablets balanced in her hands as she dictated into a Bluetooth earpiece. She didn't even glance at the food and made directly for the coffee station.

“That’s her fourth coffee run today,” Shi Qingxuan said. “She hasn’t left the hospital since Monday. Budget season is absolutely sending her.”

“Sending her?” Xie Lian asked, but Mu Qing spoke over him.

“Maybe someone should tell her caffeine isn’t a food group.”

“You’re welcome to try,” He Xuan said.

They watched as Ling Wen filled the largest cup with the darkest coffee, added nothing to it, and took a long drink while it still steamed. Shi Qingxuan opened his mouth to make a remark, but was checked by the sight of her drawing a protein bar from her pocket and stirring the coffee with it. Suddenly, a crash from the food line shattered the cafeteria's calm. A tray clattered to the floor, and food scattered in every direction. Feng Xin stood mortified before Lang Qianqiu, his coat soup-soaked.

“I am so sorry,” Feng Xin said, frantically thrusting napkins forward. “I didn’t see you there—”

“Perhaps,” Lang Qianqiu replied, “if you looked where you were going with the same attention you give to delivering babies, these incidents would not occur with such frequency.”

Feng Xin—knowing full well his destruction of things animate and inanimate was an unreasonably common occurrence—looked defeated, then bent to help the cafeteria staff clean the mess. As if to seal the point, he backed into a chair, sending it screeching across the linoleum, and a worker carrying a stack of trays had to swerve to avoid him.

The doors opened again. Director Jun—rarely seen in the lowly dregs of a cafeteria—entered with Shi Wudu deep in conversation. The plastic surgeon gestured as he spoke, and, by some natural authority, whatever quadrant of the room he approached grew quieter and straighter. Fragments of his voice carried: “—absolutely essential for the reconstructive procedures I’ve planned for the burn unit.”

“New equipment pitch,” He Xuan said. He set down his phone only long enough to extract the last of his noodles, then returned at once to scrolling through images of a liver with unusual discoloration. “Laser system. Three hundred thousand dollars.”

“How do you know the exact figure?” Xie Lian asked, surprised.

He Xuan began spinning his phone on the table, one finger pinning it in place. "Budget committee meetings. Shi Wudu has been rejected twice already."

Shi Qingxuan leaned forward. “But you’re not on the budget committee.”

“Meeting details are always stored in the morgue’s file cabinets,” He Xuan said. “People forget I can read. They also forget my morgue isn’t storage.” He tapped his screen to flag an image.

Meanwhile Pei Ming had collected his food—enough, as Mu Qing once observed, to feed a small football team—and now scanned the cafeteria for a place to sit. His eyes found their table,

and began to make his way over.

“Room for one more?” he asked, already setting his tray down, and glancing at He Xuan’s phone.

He Xuan turned the phone face-down. “Patient confidentiality.”

“Just trying to make conversation,” Pei Ming said, surrendering his hands. “Besides, they’re dead. Anyway, you’ll all be pleased to know the valve replacement was a complete success.”

“We heard,” Mu Qing said, without change of tone.

“Did you also hear that I used a modified technique that reduced the cross-clamp time by fifteen minutes?” Pei Ming continued. “I’m thinking of publishing a paper on it.”

"Fascinating," He Xuan said, in a tone suggesting it was anything but. He turned his phone back over and resumed scrolling, now with more speed to discourage further peeking. Occasionally, he would pause to compare something on the screen to another note in his little black book.

Across the cafeteria, a resident—Quan Yizhen—approached Director Jun and Shi Wudu’s table. He looked nervous, clutching a tablet and several films, tired eyes blinking rapidly.

“Poor kid looks like he hasn’t slept in days,” Shi Qingxuan lamented.

“He hasn’t,” Pei Ming confirmed, speaking round a mouthful of sandwich. “He’s been on call for orthopedics since Saturday. I heard him mumbling ‘I’m tired, chief’ to a vending machine.”

Director Jun examined whatever Quan Yizhen was presenting—attention diverted from Shi Wudu, who marked the slight by scrunching his face at Quan Yizhen—yet at length also leaned in and offered his opinion.

“Ten to one it’s the spinal fusion case from yesterday,” Pei

Ming wagered. “The patient’s family is loaded, and they’ve been demanding the Director’s personal attention.”

The cafeteria doors swung open again—for it seemed, indeed, that the whole hospital revolved, in its turns, through this lowly place—and admitted Xuan Ji, agitated as usual. The head nurse scanned the room; and, having fixed upon their table, made a direct line toward them.

"Uh oh," Shi Qingxuan ducked his head behind He Xuan. "She's on the warpath."

Xuan Ji stopped at their table and fixed upon Mu Qing. “Dr. Mu,” she said, “I’ve been paging you for twenty minutes. Your one o’clock pre-op is waiting, and anesthesia hasn’t been started because you weren’t there to sign off on the medication adjustments.”

Mu Qing checked his watch. “It’s only twelve-forty.”

“The patient arrived early,” Xuan Ji replied crisply, “and so should you.”

Mu Qing rose, gathering his barely-touched lunch. “Fine,” he said. “I’m coming.”

As he left with Xuan Ji—who continued, without pause, to enumerate various grievances of the schedule—Pei Ming shook his head. “That woman…”

At a nearby table Mei Nianqing from pharmacy appeared engaged in an intense conversation on the phone, his free hand clutching his forehead in despair. “No, I understand the policy,” they could hear him saying, “but this patient needs this medication today, not after your three-day review process.”

Ten minutes later Mu Qing reappeared in the cafeteria doorway, harried but with a certain hard-won triumph on his face. He made straight for their table, slid into his seat, and unwrapped his sandwich with urgency, as if he feared it might be taken from him.

“You escaped?” Shi Qingxuan asked.

“Temporary parole,” Mu Qing muttered between bites. “Signed the med order. Told her I forgot critical patient notes at lunch. She’s checking OR prep while I—” He gestured vaguely at the sandwich and crammed an immoderate portion into his mouth.

He Xuan, without looking up, added, “Brave move. She’ll be back.”

“I know,” Mu Qing said, muffled by bread. “Have about three minutes before she realizes I lied.”

Xie Lian smiled with sympathy. “At least finish your lunch.”

“That’s the plan,” Mu Qing replied. He reached for his water bottle, washed down the dry mouthful with a grimace, and added, “She runs the schedule like a military operation.”

As if summoned by the complaint, Xuan Ji appeared in the doorway, scanning the room with a keen, predatory attention. Her eyes settled first upon Mei Nianqing—whose call had ended, and who had at last begun to pick at his lunch with despondence—and she strode to his table, leaned down, whispered something, and placed a folder before him. His eyes widened with sudden relief.

“Your time’s up,” Feng Xin warned, nudging Mu Qing with his elbow.

Mu Qing, shovelling the remains of his chips into his mouth, didn't even lift his head. “I still have at least thirty seconds to a minute.”

He Xuan checked his watch, made a small mark in his notebook, tucked it away, and began to gather the meagre remains of his meal.

“Decomp in bay four,” he announced to no one in particular, standing with his tray. “Time-sensitive.”

A blur of movement passed through the entrance: Yin Yu,

tablet clutched against his chest, looked frantically about the room; and, on seeing Xie Lian seated, seemed visibly relieved. He gave a quick nod, raised his hand in a gesture that might have been a thumbs-up or an abbreviated wave, then turned and dashed out again, nearly colliding with an entering nurse.

"Was that—" Shi Qingxuan began.

"Hua Cheng's scribe," Mu Qing supplied, giving Xie Lian a sidelong look. "Checking that Xie Lian is sitting down instead of working."

Pei Ming snorted. "Sent his minion to spy. Efficient."

"It's not spying," Xie Lian said. "San Lang is just concerned."

"Right," Pei Ming said, and smiled. "Concerned."

At Director Jun's table, whatever business Quan Yizhen had brought appeared concluded; for the resident backed away with repeated bows of thanks. He looked marginally less exhausted—as though one small weight had been lifted from his eyelids—yet the dark circles beneath his eyes remained so marked that they seemed part of him.

Xuan Ji swept across the cafeteria and for a moment looked upon Pei Ming, the away again, stiffening and bristling.

Pei Ming slumped low in his chair, suddenly absorbed by the tabletop's texture. Mu Qing, with equal instinct, sank low.

"She's still not over it, huh?" Mu Qing observed under his breath.

"Two years and counting," Pei Ming muttered. "You'd think saving lives would be a reasonable excuse for missing someone's birthday dinner."

"It was her promotion celebration," Shi Qingxuan corrected. "And you were playing golf."

“I was networking with potential donors,” Pei Ming hissed. “For cardiology. It was work.”

“Sure.”

Pei Ming winced. “It was one mistake.”

“One of many,” Mu Qing added.

Pei Ming nodded, conceding a point he could not refute. “Anyway—three years ago my patient needed an experimental heart valve. Insurance denied it four times. Xuan Ji made one phone call and approval came through in twenty minutes. Say what you will—the woman gets results.”

At last Xuan Ji’s attention snapped onto Mu Qing. “Critical patient notes?” she called out.

Mu Qing rose and brushed crumbs from his coat. “Just finishing up here.”

“The patient is prepped. Anesthesia is waiting.” Xuan Ji checked her watch. “That’s three minutes of OR time wasted.”

“Coming,” Mu Qing sighed, and gathered his trash.

As he walked toward her, she fell into step beside him, already reviewing the afternoon schedule on her tablet. “And after surgery, you have three post-ops to check. Dr. Jiang requested a consult on his transplant case. And you still haven’t signed off on the resident evaluations that were due yesterday—”

Their voices faded as they exited, and Mu Qing’s shoulders visibly sank with each new item added to his list.

The cafeteria returned to its languid drama. Feng Xin obtained a new lunch, and now showed his phone to several trapped-looking nurses, his hands moving with an enthusiasm that suggested he was recounting a revelation. Lang Qianqiu returned in a clean coat and placed himself in the furthest corner with a medical journal held up as a shield. His glasses caught the light

whenever he glanced up to ensure that no one approached, taking particular care to direct a glare toward Feng Xin—none of which landed, for Feng Xin remained wholly oblivious.

"My next surgery is in twenty," Pei Ming announced, gathering his tray and standing, stuffing a cheek with the remains of a cheese and turkey sandwich. "Quan Yizhen is scrubbing in with me." He gestured toward the vending machine, where the exhausted resident now leaned, staring blankly at the options, as if deliberating between a granola bar that had been there since its installation and cheese crackers of equally questionable vintage.

As Xie Lian passed the surgical board, he paused to consult San Lang's schedule. The emergency surgeries from the highway accident were still in progress, and Hua Cheng's name stood beside OR 1. The estimated end time was marked "TBD"—a brief notation, and never, in such matters, a cheerful one.

"An impressive response time, wouldn't you agree?"

The voice was measured, almost melodious in its inflection. Xie Lian turned to find Director Jun standing at his side, regarding the board with that serene smile of his. Xie Lian hadn't heard him approach—uncanny, considering the man's stature.

"Yes," Xie Lian replied. "The trauma team is very efficient."

Director Jun inclined his head. "Efficiency is a quality I greatly admire," he said. "To place the right people in the right roles—there is an art in it."

There was nothing, in the words themselves, which could be called improper; yet the insistence with which Jun Wu bestowed attention on Xie Lian made him inexplicably uneasy.

"I hope you're not on restricted duties for much longer," the Director continued. "Dr. Hua *was* quite insistent."

"It's nothing serious," Xie Lian assured him.

"Even minor injuries deserve proper attention," Director Jun replied, and his smile warmed a fraction. "The body is a remarkable machine; but it requires maintenance. Much like a hospital."

He took a step nearer. Xie Lian felt, from some reptilian, instinctive place within him, the impulse to step back. Jun Wu had always been polite. There was, he told himself, no cause for wariness, and the thought made him ashamed.

"You have been with us two years now," said Director Jun, "and yet we have had so few opportunities for meaningful conversation—an oversight I have meant to correct."

“I am sure you have more important matters to attend to,” Xie Lian replied with an obedient smile.

“On the contrary,” the Director returned. “I make it a point to know the capabilities of those under my care. Your janitorial work has been exemplary; but I cannot help wondering whether your talents might be better employed elsewhere in our organization. Someone with your background in financial management would be invaluable to administration.”

Xie Lian blinked, taken aback. “Financial management? I’m afraid you're mistaken. My background is in—”

“I know exactly what your background is, Mr. Xie,” Director Jun interrupted smoothly. The smile remained; but his eyes narrowed, sharp in their kindness. “Every aspect of it. Including the six months you spent managing fund allocations for your department in Wuhan.”

It was as though Xie Lian had swallowed something cold. That brief administrative appointment had been no more than a footnote in his former life—certainly nothing that ought to have appeared in any maintenance staff application.

His shoulders tightened. “I am very content with my current position,” he said carefully.

“Are you?” Director Jun’s expression remained pleasant. “Contentment can be a trap, Mr. Xie. One does not always perceive the possibilities beyond self-imposed limits, until another shows the way.” He reached out to straighten the name badge on Xie Lian’s scrubs.

“I have always believed in second chances,” he said. “In helping people rise from their ashes—so to speak. But such opportunities require mutual assistance. I've scheduled an after-hours review of certain financial records this Friday. Your presence would be most valuable and appreciated."

Ling Wen came briskly round the corner, her sensible flats tapping in quick succession.

“Director Jun,” she called, “the board is waiting for your quarterly presentation.”

Director Jun's eyes shifted upward and to the right, a movement so controlled it appeared mechanical, cogs buzzing and whirring somewhere within the confines of a metal skull. He fixed on some indefinite point beyond the surgical board and clenched his jaw—annoyed, but only visibly so to those who had learned, through necessity, to detect such small fissures. He nodded to Ling Wen, sending her off.

“Of course.” He turned back to Xie Lian, smile restored. “We will continue our conversation later. Friday. Eight PM. In my office. I trust you can find your way there.”

With that he walked away; so nicely adjusted in his very ordinariness and in the measured carriage of his person, that Xie Lian, against his will, retained the image with unreasonable distinctness, as men remember a common object when it has been made suddenly terrible by association.

He remained by the surgical board, unsettled, with a sensation as though something fundamental had shifted beneath his feet; as though a place long familiar had, in one moment, been rendered strange, and now desired to reject him. The bland walls, the antiseptic odor, the steady passage of staff—all continued in their accustomed course; yet to him everything seemed altered, as if the same scene were viewed through some new and hostile medium. He tried to parse Director Jun's words, but found himself unable to.

When he had completed the remainder of his tasks—which were few—the day shift began to ebb. The corridors emptied themselves of familiar faces, and were replenished by night staff; Quan Yizhen alone seemed exempt from this tide, for he lived, if living it could be called, in the call room.

As Xie Lian moved through the floors, he posted his small yellow notes. It had become, in the course of two years, a habit: a manner of employing his medical knowledge without stepping beyond his role as janitorial staff. He was careful, therefore, to

make them appear as mundane reminders rather than the insights they actually were. Near a sepsis case in the ICU, he left a note about checking catheter placement. On a puzzling fever chart, he stuck a small arrow pointing to the medication timing—an innocuous gesture that might prompt the overworked nurses to notice the pattern coinciding with the antibiotic administration. Outside the room of a post-op patient whose drain output had been concerning, he left a note about checking the suction pressure.

When his unofficial rounds were done, his feet carried him downstairs, through the double doors, and into the emergency room. The highway accident victims were gone—admitted, stabilized, discharged—but new cases had already taken their places. The hospital did not slow; it only changed what it was busy with.

He chose a chair in the corner of the waiting area where he would not be in the way but could watch comings and goings. He had to wait for San Lang to finish, and the thought of returning to the empty maintenance break room—or worse, crossing paths with Director Jun again—kept him where he was. More than anything, he wanted to speak to San Lang and settle the twist in his stomach; but the thought of pulling Hua Cheng into any trouble made the feeling tighten again. He considered going elsewhere, but being near the operating rooms felt safer than wandering a hospital that had begun, without warning, to feel less familiar.

The clock passed six, then seven. Pei Ming strode by, made a comment about a nurse's scrubs, and fled before she could swat him with a tablet. Shi Qingxuan passed through as well, pink Stanley cup in hand, and paused when he saw Xie Lian.

"What are you still doing here, Xie-ge?"

"Just waiting for San Lang to finish up." Xie Lian smiled. "His surgery's running long."

"Ah, of course." Shi Qingxuan nodded knowingly and skipped off toward He Xuan's office.

Xie Lian checked his phone from time to time; but no

message came from San Lang. Surgeries often lasted many hours, and this delay, in itself, was not uncommon. Yet the waiting gave his mind too much leisure. It returned, in spite of him, to that encounter with Director Jun, taking it up again and again, turning it over, and finding each time the same hard edge.

A little after half past seven, the doors to the surgical wing swung open, and Hua Cheng emerged. He wore his scrubs, stained here and there with blood; his cap had been removed, and his hair, drawn back, was disheveled into a loose, tilting ponytail.

"San Lang!" he called, rising.

Hua Cheng looked up, weariness giving way to warmth. “Gege,” he said, “you waited?”

"It wasn't that long," Xie Lian said. "How did it go?"

"Complicated, but successful," Hua Cheng said as they walked toward the locker rooms. "I need to change first. Wait here, gege? I'll be quick."

Xie Lian nodded, and leaned against the wall. Now that San Lang was present, the hospital appeared no longer a place of hidden snares.

He debated with himself whether he wanted to mention the strange encounter. On one side, San Lang might have insights that would help make sense of it; on the other, it might prove to be nothing—an awkward exchange to which his own apprehension had lent too much color. By the time Hua Cheng returned in his street clothes, Xie Lian resolved to lay his concerns aside, at least for now. What could he say? That Director Jun had been oddly specific about a minor fragment of his past? That something in the Director’s manner made him uneasy? The matter, when he attempted to put it into speech, seemed thin and nebulous.

“Ready?” Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian nodded. “Hot pot?”

“Sounds perfect,” Hua Cheng replied, and the corner of his mouth lifted in a smile so soft.

When they reached Xie Lian’s ancient sedan, Hua Cheng spoke again. "So you're really not going to tell me what's bothering you?"

Xie Lian fumbled with his keys. “What makes you think anything is troubling me?”

“You have a tell,” Hua Cheng said; the car creaked when he leaned against it. “When you're worried, you rub your thumb against your first two fingers, like trying the texture of something.”

Xie Lian glanced down, and was surprised to find the habit already at work—his thumb moving in small circles against his fingertips without his knowledge. He stopped it at once, and let his hand fall.

“It's nothing,” he said. “Just tired and my ankle's is sore.”

“You know you can tell me anything, gege," Hua Cheng said.

"I know," Xie Lian said, unlocking the car door. "But really, it's nothing worth discussing."

They drove out of the parking garage. The hospital receded behind them, its windows bright against the darkening sky. The hotpot restaurant was lodged between a laundromat and a bodega, its faded red awning and steamed panes promising little from the outside. Within, it glowed with warm light, and the air was cloyed with spice, so much so that Xie Lian’s mouth watered the moment they crossed the threshold.

“Ah, Dr. Hua! Mr. Xie!” cried the proprietor. “Your usual table?”

“Please,” Hua Cheng replied; and his hand came, lightly, to rest at the small of Xie Lian’s back as they threaded between crowded tables.

Their accustomed place was a corner booth, half screened by carved woodwork of lotus flowers. It was quieter there, away from the bustle near the kitchen; and when Xie Lian sat, he felt himself loosen. They came often enough that Mrs. Zhang knew their order, and within minutes a server brought plum wine for Hua Cheng, tea for Xie Lian, and began to set the pot between them.

"No need to look at menus tonight?" Hua Cheng asked.

“The usual is perfect,” Xie Lian said, watching as the split pot was placed down—fiery red broth on Hua Cheng’s side, milder bone soup on his.

When they were alone again, Hua Cheng lifted his wine and inclined it toward Xie Lian with a questioning look. Xie Lian hesitated, then nodded. He didn’t drink, usually; yet sometimes, by a small custom between them, he accepted the barest taste. Hua Cheng held the rim to his lips and allowed him one drop—sweet and tart—followed by a brief, itching warmth.

"Better?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian opened his eyes to find San Lang watching him with a gentle expression reserved solely for him, despite Xie Lian's reluctance to accept it as fact.

“Much better,” he answered.

Then they fell into their familiar habit: thin slices of beef and lamb, plump shrimp, fish, mushrooms and vegetables, lowered into bubbling broths. Hua Cheng tended the pot as if it were his proper duty, fishing out the best pieces at the right moment and placing them into Xie Lian’s bowl.

“You’re spoiling me,” Xie Lian said, only half in earnest, as another shrimp was set before him.

“That’s the point,” Hua Cheng replied easily. “Someone should.”

It had taken Xie Lian time to learn how to accept such care—

to understand that, for Hua Cheng, these small acts were not mere kindnesses but a kind of function, the way he breathed. To refuse them would be to watch him suffocate; to receive them was, in its way, to allow him life. And so Xie Lian had learned, slowly and with difficulty, to accept what was offered.

Their talk drifted to safe things: a documentary Hua Cheng had begun, a new bakery near his building, plans for a weekend that had nothing to do with the hospital, nor Director Jun, nor Friday evenings.

“I’ve been thinking about your birthday gift,” Xie Lian said, reaching for a slice of lotus root, “but I need you to be more specific than ‘something handmade.’ My options are limited by my lack of artistic ability."

Hua Cheng arched a brow. "I doubt it's as bad as you claim."

“You haven’t seen the scarf I tried to knit,” Xie Lian replied. “Mu Qing gave up on teaching me.”

“I would have treasured it regardless.”

“It had seventeen different widths,” Xie Lian said, “and a hole in the middle that I still can’t explain. No—give me parameters. A poem? Something drawn?”

Hua Cheng considered, stirring the red broth until it turned in slow eddies. “A card would be nice,” he said. “Something simple. With your thoughts written inside.”

"A card," Xie Lian repeated. "That I can do."

"Your handwriting is beautiful," Hua Cheng said. "I've seen the sticky notes you leave."

Xie Lian flushed. “That’s kind of you,” he said, “but compared to most doctors’ writing, even my worst scribbles would look decent.”

“Especially mine,” Hua Cheng admitted. “I’ve been told it’s

indecipherable.”

“I wouldn’t say that,” Xie Lian replied gently, though he remembered the first time he’d seen one of Hua Cheng’s notes and hadn’t immediately recognized it as writing at all.

“Yin Yu is the only one who can read it consistently,” Hua Cheng continued. “The nurses have theories. I once overheard one say he must be psychic.”

Xie Lian smiled. “He does seem remarkably attuned to you.”

"A necessity for survival in the trauma department," Hua Cheng replied. "I think if I ever transferred to another hospital, he'd have to come with me. No one else would understand my orders."

Under the amber light of the restaurant, Xie Lian found his attention continually drawn to San Lang between his bites: to the manner in which his hair fell across his face; to the nimble way which his fingers—surgeon’s fingers—managed chopsticks, bowls, and cups, as if even these trifles required a certain exactness. There was something, too, in seeing any man away from the hospital’s hard fluorescence, that altered him—stripped away the severity of his office, and restored what the wards concealed. It made Xie Lian perceive, with a sudden clearness, how young San Lang truly was; or, if not young, then in some manner unformed, as though the figure of Dr. Hua had been set aside for a time, and there remained only San Lang, who was at once more mysterious and more knowable: the man who waited without impatience or remark while Xie Lian tended to squeaky doors and other petty grievances; the man who, after one casual mention, remembered exactly how he took his tea; the man whose eye missed nothing—not even the small, unconscious motion of Xie Lian’s thumb against his fingertips.

“What?” Hua Cheng asked, and his voice was soft.

“Nothing,” Xie Lian replied, smiling before he’d meant to do so. “Only that this—” and here he made a slight gesture—“was exactly what I needed today.”

Hua Cheng lifted a brow, then smiled. "Oh? Good."

They dithered over the meal, in no haste to return to their separate apartments, those lonely spaces that waited for them in shades of nighttime melancholy; it would mean resuming their separate lives. The restaurant gradually emptied; patrons departed in twos and threes, until they were the only customers remaining. Yet Mrs. Zhang—who, Xie Lian had gathered, had known Hua Cheng for years, though the circumstances remained one of the many things about him that were opaque—never hurried them, but came now and then to refill Xie Lian's tea and Hua Cheng's wine.

When the last of the food was gone, and the broths had reduced to a stronger, darker concentration, Hua Cheng insisted on paying the bill, as always

"Next time," he said, forestalling Xie Lian's arguments, "you can treat me to your handmade birthday card."

Outside, the night had grown cool; a gentle breeze carried autumn in supine—that season of gradual ending which, to Xie Lian, sometimes felt like the beginning of something rather than its decline. They walked back to the car, their shoulders brushing now and then.

At the sedan Hua Cheng opened the driver's door for Xie Lian, and waited until he was settled before taking his own seat. The car groaned as he slid in, the suspension dipping beneath him.

"I could drive," Hua Cheng said.

"You know you can't," Xie Lian answered, starting the engine. It replied with its usual wheeze and rattle.

Hua Cheng dismissed the objection with a wave. "I'm perfectly capable."

"I promised to be your driver," Xie Lian said, "and I intend to keep that promise."

They drove; the radio played low—a station Hua Cheng had

set the day before and which Xie Lian had not changed. They passed shuttered storefronts with metal gates drawn down, and apartment buildings whose windows shone in a checkerboard of light.

At a red light Xie Lian saw Hua Cheng stifle a yawn. “How were your surgeries?” he asked.

“Mmm,” Hua Cheng replied, and nodded. “Multiple crush injuries. Internal bleeding. Collapsed lung. The driver was pinned under the steering column for nearly an hour before they could extract him.”

“But he’ll recover?”

“With time and physical therapy, yes.” Hua Cheng rolled his shoulder, working at some knot. “It’s the second driver I’m more concerned about. Severe head trauma.”

In another life, Xie Lian might have been the surgeon making such judgments; and he felt, plainly, how he missed medicine.

“You did everything possible,” Xie Lian said, because he knew it to be true. Head injuries were always uncertain.

The light changed from red to green, and for an instant the interior of the car took on an alien glow that made Hua Cheng’s face seem briefly unfamiliar—most of all the eyepatch, which could not wholly conceal the scars underneath. Xie Lian had never asked about those scars, just as Hua Cheng had never asked outright about Xie Lian’s past in medicine.

“Have you thought more about what you want to do for your birthday?” Xie Lian asked. “Besides receiving my amateur card-making attempt?”

Hua Cheng glanced over. “I told you—nothing elaborate. Besides, we just had dinner together.”

“But there must be something *special* you’d like,” Xie Lian persisted. “We could go somewhere. The botanical gardens, if we

get out of work before it closes."

"Being with you is enough, gege."

"San Lang," Xie Lian said, "you can't make your birthday only about spending time with me. That's hardly special."

"Every day is special because of it," Hua Cheng replied.

They were already approaching Hua Cheng's apartment building; a modern structure with broad windows and a small courtyard kept in neat order. It was rich and clean in a manner wholly unlike Xie Lian's lodging across town, that ageing place of persistent faults which the landlord, with indifference, permitted to crumble.

As Xie Lian drew up before the entrance, Hua Cheng's phone gave a soft chime. He glanced at it briefly, and then returned it to his pocket.

"Yin Yu?" Xie Lian guessed; and Hua Cheng nodded.

The car idled outside Hua Cheng's building, engine humming soft vibrations up through the worn seats, a sensation Xie Lian found oddly comforting, like the pulse of something living that required neither acknowledgment nor gratitude for its continued function.

"Is he summoning you back to the hospital?" Xie Lian asked.

"Only a follow-up," Hua Cheng replied, "on the head trauma patient. His condition is stable for now."

The dashboard cast artificial blue across their faces; the shadows shoveled trenches, moving independent of their sources, like spirits circling an intruded-upon territory. Xie Lian was aware —acutely, painfully—of the exact distance between his right knee and Hua Cheng's left hand, which rested upon the centre console.

"I should let you get some rest," Xie Lian said, yet made no move unlock the doors. "You've had a long day."

Rain had begun while they drove—gentle at first, then stronger—and now it struck the roof with quick, persistent fists, enclosing them in its sound. Through the windshield the lights of the building blurred and refracted.

"Are you sure you're okay to drive home?" Hua Cheng asked; and Xie Lian observed how he leaned forward. "You look tired."

"I'm fine," Xie Lian assured him, though it was not wholly true. He was tired, but what was one more discomfort in a life that had contained greater ones? "I'm not tired at all."

Hua Cheng's hand moved, then checked itself and withdrew to his knee. "You could stay," he said. "I have a guest room."

For a moment Xie Lian allowed the thought: to follow Hua Cheng within; to cross that threshold which separated their professional lives from their private, narrow ones; to see the place where San Lang lived when he was not Dr. Hua, and learn what books he kept, what food he kept in his refrigerator.

"Another time, maybe," he said. "I have some things to take care of at home."

It wasn't a lie; there were always small tasks, accumulating like dust, that waited for him.

Hua Cheng nodded. "Will you text me when you get home? So I know you arrived safely."

"Of course."

And then neither moved, as if each expected some outside force to make the decision for them—a call, a sudden interruption, anything. The rain fell harder; sheets of it ran down the glass, and the world beyond became an impressionistic painting.

At last Hua Cheng reached for the door handle. "Good night, gege. Thank you for waiting for me today."

"Always," Xie Lian said.

“I’ll see you tomorrow morning,” Hua Cheng said, one foot at the edge of the car. “Six-thirty?”

“Six-thirty,” Xie Lian confirmed, and there was comfort in that.

With one last smile, Hua Cheng stepped out and the rain drenched him. He sprinted across the slick rock walkway—hunched over and as carefully as he could—to below the awning of his apartment, where he turned around to wave at Xie Lian, water streaming from his sleeve. Xie Lian returned the gesture, waiting until San Lang had disappeared inside before finally putting the car into drive. The windshield wipers struggled to keep pace.

When Xie Lian reached his own apartment—shabby, that poor little thing—he sat in the car for a long time, listening to the rain drumming on the roof and to the engine as it cooled and ticked. His phone chimed.

Did you get lost? San Lang had written, and Xie Lian could hear him teasing.

He smiled. *Just arrived. About to head in.*

The response came immediately, as if Hua Cheng had been waiting, phone in hand: *Good. Sleep well, gege.*

Xie Lian's thumb hovered over the screen for a long moment before he typed: *Sweet dreams, San Lang.*

He pressed send before he could second-guess himself, watching as the message delivered. Three dots appeared, then disappeared, then appeared again, as if Hua Cheng was drafting and redrafting his response. Finally, a single red heart emoji appeared on the screen.

When not swamped by a fleet of rattling gurneys, Tonglu General's emergency room became purgatorial: neither day nor night, but that liminal stall of time. Light was always the same, fluorescent-washed, bleaching even the healthiest visitor.

Xie Lian swept his mop across the linoleum in wide arcs. The water sloshed now and then against the wringer. Cleaning, though Sisyphean, was predictable, mundane. He could savor it as one savored a spell of clear weather, knowing it would be broken by the next squall of gurney wheels.

"Xie-ge! You will not believe the day I've had."

Shi Qingxuan appeared at his shoulder. Despite the late hour, he vibrated with an energy that suggested this wasn't his first—or even fifth—caffeinated beverage of the day. "It's been absolutely sending me."

"Oh?" Xie Lian smiled, and swept rightward to avoid him. "Busy work day?"

"Busy doesn't even begin to cover it." Shi Qingxuan tapped each raised finger against his thumb to keep accounts. "Three insurance companies ghosted me. Director Jun wanted reports on the community outreach programs—like, yesterday. And then He Xuan left me on read when I asked if he wanted coffee, which was mad sus if you ask me."

Xie Lian nodded politely.

"But that's not even the tea," Shi Qingxuan went on, and gestured so wildly that water—was it water?—slopped over the rim of his pink Stanley. "I've decided I'm going back to school. Nursing program. I'm so crunk about it!"

He raised both hands, triumphantly, as if already capped and gowned.

"You're… crunk?" Xie Lian paused his swabbing. "What does that mean?"

“And Feng Xin was all, *are you sure that’s a good idea*, which —ugh—rude,” Shi Qingxuan said. “Like, bestie, I’m trying to level up my career, not get your approval. No thoughts, head empty with that one sometimes.”

“Qingxuan,” Xie Lian tried again, “what does *crunk* mean?”

“Anyway.” Shi Qingxuan took a loud sip. “I already applied. It’s part-time, so I can keep working here. Imagine He Xuan’s face when I show up in scrubs; he’s gonna be gagged.” He paused to check his phone, then looked up, seized by fresh outrage. “Oh, did I tell you Mu Qing got into a Twitter war with some rando claiming anesthesia isn’t real medicine?”

“That’s wonderful, Qingxuan,” Xie Lian said, and meant it. “You’ll make an excellent nurse.”

The emergency bay doors swished open. Paramedics floated a small child on a gurney, legs in temporary splints. Behind them trailed a woman—the mother, presumably—so nakedly guilty and panicked that she couldn't look at her son for long.

“Pediatric trauma, both legs,” one of the paramedics called. “Possible tibial and fibular fractures bilateral. Patient’s been given ketamine for pain management.”

The child's mouth made little bubbles of sound, pleased with himself, pleased with the ceiling.

“Trauma room two is prepped,” a nurse called back, taking the gurney’s head.

“I should…” Shi Qingxuan pivoted slow on his heels. “I should check if the family needs anything! Catch you later, Xie-ge.”

Through the glass walls of trauma room two, Xie Lian could see Hua Cheng waiting. He cut away the temporary splints with trauma shears, revealing swollen, discolored legs; he palpated them, then asked the boy to wiggle his toes. The child obeyed, between giggles, were it a game. Nurses darted about like minnows: monitors, cables, cuffs; a portable X-ray wheeled in; hands appeared

and withdrew. Mother hovered at the edge, a mosquito at their pond, swatted by a nurse who had no patience for such things.

She stood hunched under anxiety's shawl, hands twisting and clasping. Hua Cheng listened—though not visibly so—while he applied pressure bandages to a small laceration, and told a nurse to prepare the X-ray.

"I put water and soap on the trampoline," the mother was saying. Her voice carried louder when the door opened to admit Shi Qingxuan. "A TikTok said it would make bubbles."

"Well," Hua Cheng said, "thanks to that, your kid's legs are more flexible than ever."

Shi Qingxuan suppressed a startled laugh by coughing into his elbow.

"Both tibial fractures," Hua Cheng continued, "though the right is compound. We'll need X-rays, but he's likely heading to surgery tonight."

The boy, skating Saturn's rings, stared at the ceiling. "Mom! Mom! The lights are dancing!"

"And page orthopedics," Hua Cheng said.

"Already done, Dr. Hua," Yin Yu said; and Xie Lian thought of the symbiosis between Hua Cheng and Yin Yu—how they moved as one creature, with two sets of hands and one intent—and remembered Feng Xin and Mu Qing at his sides in another life, flanking him much the same.

Not a minute after the words left Yin Yu's mouth, Quan Yizhen shuffled into the room. His scrubs hung from his frame like clothes on a scarecrow; were a gust to take him, no one would be surprised.

"Orthopedics," he announced flatly; though it wasn't clear whether he was only repeating the last word his mind managed to catch. "Sorry I was late. I was sleeping in the supply closet."

Hua Cheng glanced up. “You were prompt, Dr. Quan.”

Through the glass, Hua Cheng’s eye met Xie Lian’s two, and he smiled: *Hi, gege.*

Xie Lian straightened. He flushed and retrieved his neglected mop, as if to look suddenly busy, and as if he hadn't been watching San Lang at all.

Emergency rooms received visitors in waves, some offshore force yanking them toward its doors and then, just as carelessly, letting go. They came in peculiar clusters: three cardiac arrests in an hour, monitors shrieking in chorus; then, abruptly, nothing, a slackening. A family of five, gray-green with food poisoning; two unrelated men with identical workplace lacerations down to the crescent of embedded grit along the edges. Xie Lian thought of a theory he’d once read, years ago: that the universe is not random but patterned beyond human senses, and that this is why suffering, too, arrived in linked runs, one thing tugging the next into place though you cannot see the string.

The doors opened and another wave arrived.

A man came in on his feet, but only just: gaunt, mid-thirties perhaps, pupils blown wide. He clutched his abdomen. Blood came through his fingers in globules, striking the linoleum with wet smacks. He reached for the registration desk, left a crimson smear on the counter, and then his knees gave way.

“Active bleeding!” Xuan Ji shouted. She hauled a gurney sideways with a shrill shriek of wheels and tried to get him onto it.

“Don’t fucking touch me!” He snarled. “They’re coming—they’re coming for me!”

His elbow caught Xuan Ji across the jaw. She stumbled back, palm to her face. He lurched sideways, knocked an IV stand over; it clattered and waiting patients recoiled.

"We need security," Xuan Ji called.

Hua Cheng emerged from trauma room two. He straightened as he walked, and because others were bent to panic, seemed taller than he was.

The man brandished a pair of scissors from a nearby tray. “I said nobody fucking touch me.”

“Clear the space,” Hua Cheng said.

He stood between the man and staff, hands open and low. “Sir,” he said, “you're losing blood.”

The man lunged at him with the scissors. He was weak from loss of blood, but still dangerous: weak men are often the more dangerous, because they know they have little left and spend it all at once. Hua Cheng moved aside. His forearm checked the man’s wrist and turned it, so the scissors spun out and rang across the floor. In the same movement he took the man’s balance from him, used the force of his lunge to carry him down, and brought him to the tiles face-first.

“I have his arms,” Hua Cheng said. “Xuan Ji.”

She was there before he finished and slid the needle home.

“Get a pressure dressing on that wound,” Hua Cheng said. “Call the OR. Tell them significant blood loss. Possible liver involvement.”

The nurses moved, as if summoned by the blood itself. One, two, three: they lifted him, limp now except for the wound. The dressing didn't hold. Blood bloomed, as blood does, richly, and by rules: forward, outward, always down in its race to return to earth.

Hua Cheng followed the gurney's caterwauling towards a trauma bay. “Type and cross for four units,” he said. “Get ultrasound in here.”

Then the door hissed closed, curtains were drawn. It was all swallowed so quickly others barely had time to know fear had entered and left. Someone stooped to retrieve the scissors. Someone

marked the blood for mopping. The printers resumed their thin chattering, the monitors their patient metronome. The hospital, which could take almost anything into itself and keep going, took this too.

Xie Lian only just leaned his mop against the wall when the doors opened again and the room seemed to breathe inward.

Three men came in. The first was tall, height having bent him forward rather than lifted him up, a long shapeless coat draped over him and hiding his badly pitted face—old marks of acne, youth gone rotten upon his skin. He reached into his coat and drew a dull black handgun. The two behind him fanned out, not unlike dogs loosed into a field.

“Where is he?”

At the desk, a new nurse—pink-cheeked still—saw the gun and screamed. She slapped the panic button hidden under the desk.

“Shut up,” the man said.

The gun listened to his voice. It turned with him.

Xie Lian felt his mind sheared to bare bone in a single strike. Here was the gun. Here was the man. Here was death.

He stepped back, and the mop bucket tipped, sending a wash of grey-brown water out over the floor, grit and mop-filth skidding with it.

The gun turned toward him. “You," the man said. "Where’d they take him? The one with the gut wound.”

Looking into the gun’s snubbed nose, Xie Lian remembered another one, two years ago, lying in a spread of blood on the floor of his apartment—his mother’s, or his father’s, he'd never known; there'd been so much of it that which body it came from seemed beside the point.

The memory returned well bleached and bone-picked:

sunlight through cheap blinds, each slat laying a pale bar across the floor, inching toward the gun as if to bless it with dust motes. It'd been his first day at Tonglu. He'd risen early, pressed his scrubs smooth, gone over the names he would say, the way he would introduce himself. Shi Qingxuan had shown him supply closets, laughed at how formal he was, pressed a cup of tea into his hands at midday. He'd memorized the location of crash carts just in case a nurse was absent and he could still wheel one into the gap, though by then he was, suddenly, only a janitor.

Then home to ordinary things: the neighbor's radio crackling through the wall, groceries sweating in their thin plastic bags. Such is the plain face of a life before it's split. He'd thought of violence often enough—in films, in stories, in those bloodless contrivances that enter the mind, make a little noise there, and pass on. But the real thing takes the faces of your mother and father. It lies across the floorboards you swept that morning.

“I asked you a question,” the man said, coming on a step. “Where is he?”

The second man scanned the corridor. “Zhou, we don’t have time for this.”

Xie Lia's voice withdrew into soft folds of viscera. His hands shook. “I…”

“Speak up.” Zhou drove the gun towards him.

At that moment, trauma bay one sighed open, and Hua Cheng stepped out.

Time, they say, slows down in such instants. It does not. What slows is the formal part of thought, by which then instinct has acted.

"They took him to surgery," Xie Lian lied.

“Surgery? Where?”

“On the fifth floor,” replied Xie Lian.

"Show me," Zhou demanded, motioning with the gun.

"I can take you there," said Hua Cheng. "I'm the surgeon who __"

"No!" Zhou said. His glance, suspicious and rapid, swung from one to the other, and then fixed upon Xie Lian. "You—the janitor. You'll take me."

The second man shifted uneasily. "Zhou, security is gonna be here any minute."

"Then we better hurry," said Zhou; and, springing forward, seized Xie Lian back against his chest, so that Xie Lian stood between him and harm; the gun at Xie Lian's temple was cold, and Zhou's breath came hot and rancid against his cheek.

"Stand back," Zhou said.

So Hua Cheng remained still, and Zhou forced Xie Lian towards the elevator.

"Keep back, all of you!" he cried again.

The second and third men moved to block Hua Cheng's way. Then came the turn of the corridor, and with it, the knowledge that San Lang was gone from sight. Terror went through Xie Lian like current. Sweat broke at his hairline and turned cold at once. Every muscle locked with the urge to wrench free and run—run anywhere, run blind—even knowing there was nowhere to go. The thing in him older than reason had risen, and was clawing now at the walls of his body.

Zhou's arm closed on his throat. His lungs burned and pulled uselessly, and because the body will try any door before death, Xie Lian opened his mouth.

"My name is Xie Lian. July fifteenth—I was born on July fifteenth. I—I have friends. Mu Qing. Feng Xin. I've known them forever."

“What the fuck are you doing?” Zhou hissed, jabbing him with the gun.

“My father—he was a professor. Politics. He taught at a university. My mother worked in welfare. She helped people—” Xie Lian choked on breath and tears. “People like you.”

“I said shut up!”

Voices burst from the emergency room—commands, running feet, something heavy hitting the floor, a curse cut short. Another crash. Struggle. Zhou stabbed at the elevator button again and again, cursing under his breath.

“I’m not ready to die. I just—I just started again. I—” His throat tightened. “Hua Cheng. His name is Hua Cheng. San Lang. I—I love him. I never told him, I never said it out loud—And I still have my father’s watch. It’s broken, but I wind it every morning anyway. Every morning. It’s the only thing I have left of him. Please—please—please—” His breath hitched. “I didn’t get to say goodbye. I’m not ready for that again. Don't let someone else feel that because of me.”

The gun drove hard into Xie Lian’s temple. He flinched and shut his eyes; when he opened them again, he saw Hua Cheng at the turn of the corridor.

Zhou punched the button once more. “Fuck—”

The movement was so fast that Xie Lian barely registered it. Hua Cheng's hand shot forward and clamped around Zhou's gun wrist, yanking it upward and away from Xie Lian's head; his other arm wrapped around Zhou's throat from behind, breaking the grip. The gun discharged with a crack that whited out the corridor. Xie Lian's vision smeared. His ears filled with a single sustained note, as if someone had struck a bell inside his skull.

Zhou tried to struggle, but Hua Cheng drove a knee into the back of his leg and dropped him. The gun clattered free as his wrist twisted.

Within seconds Zhou went limp. Hua Cheng eased him to the floor, checked his pulse, then retrieved the gun and removed the magazine. He nodded to the security guards rounding the corner in their belated hustle; they descended on Zhou before he could regain consciousness, and you would think, to see their brisk efficiency, that they had been useful all along. Only then did Hua Cheng look over at Xie Lian, who stood frozen, trembling, as if some part of him were still waiting for the shot.

White lights above smeared and left trails, like tails of small, departing ghosts. The ringing persisted: a high, thin whine that turned all other sound into something heard through water, through a wall. A taste rose to the back of his teeth, bitter, which he knew was his adrenaline.

"Gege," came a distorted voice.

The corridor stretched and contracted like the bellows of some vast lung.

"Xie Lian. You're safe now. Look at me, gege."

Xie Lian blinked hard, struggling to bring Hua Cheng's face into focus. His vision narrowed to a tunnel rimmed with grey, and at the edges dark motes swarmed like gnats. He thought: San Lang. But the name and the face wouldn't meet; one hovered six inches in front of the other, and his eyes couldn't resolve them into a single thing.

"I need —" he said. "I can't —" He felt his throat intact but couldn't quite believe it was his.

"Breathe with me," Hua Cheng was saying; but breathing— how do you breathe? You've done it all your life and now can't recall the method. Something warm touched his shoulders. Hands. San Lang's hands. "You're here. You're safe."

"San Lang," Xie Lian rasped, and his legs gave out beneath him.

Hua Cheng caught Xie Lian against his chest before he

reached the floor. "I've got you. You're all right." He took Xie Lian's wrist, two fingers on the radial artery. "Your pulse is fast but it's strong. You're all right."

Xie Lian's stomach turned over, and for a bad moment he thought he'd be sick on San Lang's chest. He swallowed it down. His teeth knocked together so hard he tasted something metallic and thought: I've bitten my tongue, that's all that is, that's just blood, mine, only mine. Hua Cheng adjusted his grip, one hand cradling the back of Xie Lian's head, the other on his lower back, and breathed slowly against him.

Xie Lian couldn't tell how long they stood there. He knew only San Lang's warmth, the smell of him—antiseptic soap, coffee, skin—and breathing, in and out, in and out, which his own lungs eventually began to copy. The shaking came in waves, each one smaller, though from inside they all felt the same. The ringing in his ears thinned, and through it the hospital came back—voices low in the corridor, a radio crackling, a phone, the chime of the elevator that had finally, uselessly arrived. He'd never loved ordinary sounds so much in his life.

"Let's sit down," Hua Cheng said, and walked him to a chair a security officer brought over.

Hua Cheng crouched in front of him, one hand on Xie Lian's knee, and took his wrist again: two fingers, eyes on his watch. After a moment he nodded to himself. His scrubs were rumpled where Xie Lian had grabbed fistfuls of them, and somewhere in the fog surfaced the absurd thought that he'd wrinkled them beyond saving.

"I'm sorry about your scrubs," he said.

"Gege, don't worry about that."

Over San Lang's shoulder, Xie Lian could see them loading Zhou onto a gurney, security flanking either side. The gun was gone. The corridor looked the way it always looked, down to the hand-sanitizer dispenser with its crooked nozzle.

"He wanted to kill the patient," Xie Lian said, and coughed

on phlegm. "I lied. I'm sorry."

"You did. And he's alive because of it," Hua Cheng said.

Shi Qingxuan came up the hall. He was sober-faced, which was unlike him, and keeping his distance, which was unlike him too. "Xie-ge," he said. "How are you doing?"

Xie Lian heaved a breath. "I'm fine, Qingxuan."

"You are absolutely not fine," Shi Qingxuan said, "which is completely valid. Security wants to know if you need medical attention. He Xuan is offering to check you over—and that's like, basically a declaration of love from him, you know?"

"I'll examine him," San Lang said.

Shi Qingxuan nodded, "I'm right down there," and went.

"Can you stand, gege?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian could. Mostly. Hua Cheng pulled him up and kept a hand on his back as they walked.

"The patient," he said. "Is he —"

"In surgery."

The examination room was small, cold, lit by a single, buzzing overhead bar. The paper crinkled as Xie Lian sat on the table. More familiar sounds.

"May I?" Hua Cheng's hand hovered near his throat.

Xie Lian tilted his head. San Lang palpated the trachea, checked lymph nodes. "Some bruising," he said. "You'll be hoarse for a day or two. Does anywhere else hurt?"

"My head. The ringing's mostly gone, but everything still feels..."

San Lang nodded, took a penlight from his pocket, and checked his pupils. "Pupillary response is normal. Nausea?"

"A little. Dizzy."

"Adrenaline," he said, "but you know that." He clicked the penlight away. He rested both hands on Xie Lian's knees, thumbs sweeping back and forth.

As the adrenaline ebbed, what Xie Lian had said to Zhou about Hua Cheng came back. Disjointed at first, then with sudden, unwelcome clarity. Heat rushed to his face.

"I..." He swallowed. "Back there. What I said about you, about how I feel. I should probably explain."

"Gege, you don't need to —"

"No, I do," Xie Lian said. "It's not fair to blurt something like that and then pretend it didn't happen. Even if it wasn't how I planned to—I mean, not that I had planned to—but I did mean—" He stopped, frustrated with his own mouth.

"Take a breath, gege."

Xie Lian breathed. He made himself look up because you cannot say a thing like this to someone's kneecaps. "I meant what I said, but you shouldn't feel obligated to—"

"You said many things," Hua Cheng said. "None of which you need to explain or take back."

"Do you wish I hadn't?"

"No, gege." Hua Cheng's hands covered Xie Lian's fidgeting ones. "I'm saying tell me again when you're ready. When it's just you and me."

Xie Lian's eyes burned. Two tears slipped free. He didn't lift a hand to stop them; his hands were beneath San Lang's. He'd forgotten. That was all. Forgotten that someone's hands on yours

could be the entire sentence. No after. No because. No therefore waiting. His chest couldn't hold the whole of it—this bright, swelling, poppyseed-spark thing traveling from San Lang’s palms into the small, breakable chamber of his heart—so it overflowed, warm and salt, down his face.

"This doesn't change anything," Hua Cheng said, and squeezed his hands. "Whenever you want. I'm not going anywhere."

Xie Lian looked at him. "You're not uncomfortable?"

"With your feelings?" Hua Cheng said. "Never, gege."

The shift ended quickly, or at least it felt that way in the chlorinated haze that follows terrifying things. There was still pecking to be done: incident reports, statements, the sort of paperwork Xie Lian had only a vague, immigrant's grasp of. Hua Cheng had his own stack to navigate, which he did with much more understanding, and kept one hand on Xie Lian's back; the gesture made him less dazed and he was grateful for it.

But then he had to go home, and dread swallowed him whole.

Home. What even was that. After today, home couldn't be home. Not for a while. Home was too quiet, so devoid of life Xie Lian only had to dust once a month instead of every week—a chore he used to loathe but found himself missing when the people of his life began to leave and took their dust with them.

Yet home was inevitable. He couldn't justify sleeping in the hospital's on-call room when surgeons—*practicing* surgeons, he would have added, if only to preempt San Lang's protests—needed the space. It occurred to him that he could ask Hua Cheng to stay the night, just for the night, and this sent his heart stuttering. He huffed and puffed over his remaining paperwork, flustered, but the thought kept circling back, and he knew without quite thinking it that Hua Cheng beside him was the only way he would sleep at all.

And then he felt selfish. His apartment, compared to Hua Cheng's, was... legal. Yes, that was the word. Legally habitable, at least until the termites finished their work on the floorboards beneath the refrigerator and sent it through to Mrs. Li's unit below.

Would Hua Cheng want to be around after that?

There were so many graceless parts of life everyone agreed to stuff under the floorboards. Xie Lian's life—this little, frail-boned thing—was precious but malformed. Lovable, perhaps, only as a caregiver persists in sustaining the life of a ruined animal: stubbornly, against reason, some might think, the same people who kept their curtains open so you could see how cleanly they lived. And worse—Xie Lian had fallen to it from heights, from gold.

Descent makes shame stickier.

***

The parking garage was cavernous at this late hour, their footsteps clipping back at them off the concrete. Bulbs overhead cast their faces in a greenish, formaldehyde wash. Xie Lian fumbled with his keys and dropped them.

"Let me," Hua Cheng said, retrieving them, "I could drive if you're tired."

"No," Xie Lian said, snatching the keys. "You know you can't, San Lang."

Xie Lian lowered himself into the driver's seat, its cracked vinyl snagging his scrubs like hangnails. At a red light, he discovered himself picking at a tear in the wheel until it looked like a tiny mouth vomiting yellow foam.

“Are you okay?” Hua Cheng asked.

"Nothing," Xie Lian replied on reflex. Then, meeting skepticism, sighed: "I'm fine. Just... processing."

Hua Cheng's knee nudged the center console.

They moved through sleep-submerged districts, silent aside from tires hissing over damp asphalt. Street lamps cast their yellow benedictions in smears across the windshield.

“We’re heading to our apartments,” Xie Lian said obviously.

“Yes.” Hua Cheng watched from the corner of his eye.

Xie Lian inclined his head, yet paused ere assent could fully settle. His fingers clenched upon the wheel.

"I was wondering... that is, I wouldn't normally ask, but after today..." He took a deep breath. "Would you mind staying? Just for tonight. I understand if you can't, of course. If you don't want to

that's fine because I don't have a spare bed or anything, so—"

"Gege," Hua Cheng interjected, "I would be happy to stay with you."

Relief broke upon Xie Lian such that his vision trembled through sudden tears. "Thank you, San Lang."

Xie Lian's grip on the wheel loosened. Blood returned to blanched knuckles.

***

The nearer they drew to Xie Lian's apartment, the more acutely shame crept up his neck, not unlike the ivy clinging to the crumbling building's northern face. A security lamp at the entrance flickered with an erratic and sickly light, casting itself upon graffiti half-concealed beneath the landlord's perfunctory effort at remedy; the result was a wall that appeared diseased and mottled, its affliction rendered more wretched still by trash bags which had burst their contents across concrete like entrails.

Xie Lian parked over the old oil stain matching his car's leak. Neither men stirred. Most especially not Xie Lian. He viewed the building through what he imagined to be Hua Cheng's eye: peeling paint, mismatched curtains, general surrender.

"I should warn you." Xie Lian worried his bottom lip. "It's not much."

"I don't need much," Hua Cheng said. His eye hadn't once touched the building; it rested, as it so often did, upon Xie Lian alone.

Night air smelt of people's meals and car exhaust, cool and bitter against their faces. They proceeded down a corridor where yet another light convulsed overhead, sputtering with such insistence that Xie Lian fancied it to be some coded correspondence with its fellow sufferer in the lot below. Apartment 403 occupied the terminus of the hall. Bronze numerals hung crooked upon the door, one absent entirely, its ghost preserved in an unpainted

silhouette against the wood.

Inside, Xie Lian flicked the switch: a studio, clean to obsession, but like a bone lacking its meat. An air mattress hugged one wall with a blanket at its foot topped by a pillow. Nearby, a folding table and laptop. The kitchen—if it could be called such—housed a miniature refrigerator, a microwave aged to nicotine yellow, and a two-burner stove that'd, in all probability, borne witness to the decade preceding Xie Lian's birth.

"Bathroom's through there." Xie Lian inclined his head toward a door. "It's small, and the hot water is temperamental. Best to let it run for a minute."

He moved around Hua Cheng, conscious of the little space separating them. "I can make tea. Or there's water, if you'd prefer."

"Tea would be nice," Hua Cheng said. He walked the room, collecting observations: a bookshelf constructed from milk crates holding medical texts in two languages; a bamboo plant on the windowsill, flourishing despite all evidence it shouldn't; and one framed photograph—a younger Xie Lian in wushu white, medal-proud, flanked by his mother, whom he most resembled, and his father, both beaming.

Xie Lian busied himself with the kettle. He retrieved two mismatched mugs from the cabinet—one chipped, another advertising a bank he'd never used—and measured tea leaves against his palm.

"You don't have to stand," he said over his shoulder. "You can sit... anywhere."

Anywhere being a word that flattered the room considerably.

Hua Cheng put his messenger bag against the wall. He sat carefully on the air mattress' edge and sank into it. He didn't look beset. Only elegance settling, a little jagged, against modesty.

Xie Lian hadn't replaced the mattress despite its insistence on deflating. On the kitchen counter, a charity's thank-you letter bore a

photograph of children in white martial art uniforms mid-strike. Beside it, a bank statement showed the same sum leaving his account each month, and beneath that, a grocery receipt: rice, rice, rice.

"Thank you for agreeing to stay," Xie Lian said. "I know it's not what you're used to."

“What do you think I'm used to, gege?"

"I've seen your apartment building. It's... nice."

"It is," Hua Cheng said. "But I've lived in far worse. Field hospitals with dirt floors. Barracks with thirty other men. A tent in monsoon season."

"This place *does* get damp when it rains. There's a leak in the bathroom ceiling."

"Familiar territory, then."

The kettle loosed its thin, desperate cry. Xie Lian poured the water over jasmine leaves—his good tea, ordinarily reserved for occasions of note.

"San Lang," he said, pressing into Hua Cheng's hands the bank mug, "were you in the military?"

"What makes you ask?" Hua Cheng said, playing dumb.

"Barracks. Field hospitals." Xie Lian sat next to him. Already the mattress began its collapse, drawing them together.

"Sorry," Xie Lian murmured, bracing against the dip.

"Don't apologize." Hua Cheng blew across the surface of his tea. "It's not a personal failing. But yes—military surgeon.”

"Combat zones?" Xie Lian ran his thumbs along his mug.

"Three tours. Afghanistan, mostly."

"Is that how—" Xie Lian made a vague gesture toward his own eye, then, "I'm sorry. Too personal."

"It's fine," Hua Cheng said. "Yes, but it was a long time ago."

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian said again. "How do you stay so calm? With the gun, I mean. I was shaking apart inside."

"You learn to compartmentalize. To act without thinking," Hua Cheng said.

"Do you miss it?" Xie Lian sipped his tea. "The military?"

Hua Cheng's expression closed, a door drawn shut upon a lit room. "Some aspects. The clarity of purpose. The certainty that what I did mattered, directly and immediately." He turned the mug in his hands. "The hospital offers that, in its way. But in the field, there's no insurance, no paperwork. I miss that part."

"But you don't miss all of it," Xie Lian followed.

"No," Hua Cheng said. "Not all of it."

"And now? At Tonglu?"

"Better. Success means something more lasting. Out there I'd reconstruct a man's knee and watch him redeploy inside a month. Here, I reconstruct a knee and the patient takes his daughter to the park."

"How long since you left service?"

"Three years, four months, sixteen days."

"You count?"

"It was a significant date," Hua Cheng said with a shrug that transferred through their connected shoulders. "The day one life concluded and another commenced."

"I understand that," Xie Lian said.

Outside, cars passed at intervals. Their lights swept briefly through thin curtains, illuminating the room in pale, transient strokes.

"Is the tea alright?" Xie Lian asked.

"It's perfect," Hua Cheng said. "Jasmine?"

The air mattress went on swallowing them, pressing them heavy against one another.

After a time, Hua Cheng spoke. "Gege, have you ever thought about going back?"

"Back?"

"To medicine." A pause, then: "To being a surgeon again."

Xie Lian stared into his cup where loose leaves turned in slow, drowned circles at the bottom.

"I think about it every day," he said. "Every day, honestly. I'm at the hospital and it's—I don't know. Like being in a house you used to live in, except you're not allowed past the hallway."

"Then why not go back to medical school?"

"San Lang." Xie Lian almost laughed. "The licensing exams alone, and then residency applications, starting practically from zero—"

"You're skilled, gege. I've seen it. Your instincts. Half the doctors defer to those sticky notes of yours."

"That was a long time ago." Xie Lian fashioned a placating smile. "Things change."

Hua Cheng didn't press. He drank his tea. "When did you last eat?"

"Lunch, I think? But I didn't finish."

"It's nearly midnight. You must be starving."

"Maybe a little," Xie Lian conceded.

"Let me order something." Hua Cheng's phone was already in hand. "What's open this late?"

"There's a Sichuan place two blocks down. They deliver until two." Xie Lian said. "Actually really authentic. The owner's from Chengdu."

"Perfect." Hua Cheng pulled up the menu. "What's good?"

"San Lang, let me pay."

"After today? No. Let me feed you."

Feed you. What does it mean when someone says this—not *get you food*, not *let's eat*, but *feed you*.

Xie Lian was too tired, too emptied out to refuse. "The mapo tofu is good. Oh, and the dan dan noodles—they taste like these ones I used to get from a cart near my old hospital." Old memories: yellow tarps, food carts, mouth full of heat. "And the dry-fried string beans, if you like those."

"I like everything." Hua Cheng selected each dish, then added twice-cooked pork and hot and sour soup. "Extra chili oil too."

"You like spicy food?" Xie Lian said.

"Very much." Hua Cheng smiled, vulpine and sure.

Xie Lian fidgeted. The hospital's sterile, nameless smell clung to him. "Maybe we could get ready for bed while we wait?" he offered. "I have some old pajama pants that might fit you. They're too big on me."

"If gege would be so kind."

Xie Lian moved to the plastic storage bin that served as a

dresser. He rifled through neatly folded clothes, pulling out a pair of black cotton pajama pants. "These were a gift from Feng Xin. He's terrible at estimating sizes." He held them up. "I don't have an extra shirt that would fit you, though."

"That's fine. I usually don't sleep in one anyway."

Xie Lian felt grateful for the dim light that might hide his blush. He thought of Hua Cheng's shoulders: their breadth. "You can use the bathroom first if you'd like."

"No. Go ahead, gege."

Xie Lian scrubbed himself raw. He dressed in clothes so often washed they'd forgotten their original color. He caught his reflection in the mirror: angry weals already rising across his throat where Zhou's arm had crushed it. He pulled up his collar, tried to cover them. Then gave up. Splashed cold water on his face instead and watched it drip from his chin.

When he emerged, Hua Cheng was propped against the window, a dark silhouette with folded arms. He looked out at a street that offered nothing but the occasional sodium-yellow stutter. A man watching a world that had mostly gone to sleep and finding it, perhaps, preferable.

"Your turn." Xie Lian gestured to the bathroom. Their shoulders brushed as Hua Cheng passed.

Xie Lian sat at the edge of the mattress. It whined, air escaping from the corner where duct tape curled. He placed his palm over the leak and felt the cool stream of breath against his skin. He listened to water running behind the door. The closeness of domestic sounds made by someone else in his space. How long had it been? Not since his parents. Not since Feng Xin.

The bathroom door opened. The borrowed pants hung low on Hua Cheng's hips, waistband a dark line against pale skin. His chest was bare, lean but solid. His hair fell loose around his shoulders, darker where wet at the ends, and where it parted against his neck the silver caught—two hoops through the shell of

his ear, a stud in the lobe. Xie Lian had seen them every day at the hospital, but here they were little impossible stars. What pinned Xie Lian most was the chrysanthemum tattoo on Hua Cheng's left arm. It began at the elbow, snaking upward across bicep and shoulder, petals unfurling toward the collarbone. *Chrysanthemum (菊)*: steadfastness; constancy.

Xie Lian's mouth went dry. He studied a loose thread on his pants as though the secret to composure might be found inside its tangle. "The pants fit alright?"

"Perfect," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian scooted to make room on the bed, nearly slipping off the edge in his haste. He thought of Hua Cheng's eye patch, the one thing unchanged. Wet hair, bare chest, borrowed pants, and still this. He wondered how long Hua Cheng had worn it. Whether he slept in it. Whether each morning he touched the patch first, before anything else.

"Your eye," he said. "You don't have to keep that on. If it's more comfortable."

Hua Cheng's finger found the strap. "Most people prefer I keep it on."

"I want you to be comfortable," Xie Lian said. He twisted the hem of his shirt between thumb and forefinger.

A sharp knock at the door made them both turn.

"That must be the food." Xie Lian scrambled off the mattress and stumbled, foot tangling in the sheet.

Hua Cheng eyed him fondly. Then he was on his feet. Then at the door. By the time Xie Lian freed himself, bags were on the table, lids popped. Sichuan pepper steam numbed the air. Hua Cheng dragged the table to the mattress. Space between them was negligible now, the width of a hand, less.

Xie Lian watched oil make patterns in the noodle sauce like

snakes wriggling through a pond. Nostalgia struck him on the first bite: rich sesame undertones, the slight funk of preserved vegetables. It tasted like late nights at the hospital. Like celebration dinners and home. He chewed slowly, on the left side of his mouth where he always did.

"Good?" Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian nodded. When he swallowed: "Perfect."

Containers passed back and forth. The mattress sunk and brought them closer. Thigh against thigh. Shoulder to shoulder. Heat against heat.

Hua Cheng reached across him for the mapo tofu. "Almost as good as being in Chengdu."

"You've been?" Xie Lian asked.

"Once. Medical conference." He took a piece with his chopsticks. "Stayed a few extra days."

"I've never been," Xie Lian said. "Always wanted to, though. For the food, if nothing else."

"You'd like it," Hua Cheng said. "It's slower there. And the pandas."

"You saw the pandas?" Xie Lian couldn't hide his childish smile.

Hua Cheng smiled properly then too. "I did."

Their discourse meandered, from the dismal horrors of hospital cafeteria food to the best street food they'd encountered, to childhood meals they remembered with irrational fondness, to films they'd seen. Hua Cheng liked morally ambiguous ones; Xie Lian liked ones where the dog survived. They talked about strange dreams. Hua Cheng recounted one such vision: that he'd found a butterfly with torn wings on a roadside and carried it in his cupped hands for eight hundred miles, and when he finally opened them

the wings had mended, but his palms were cut to ribbons.

The meal concluded: empty containers and stained napkins and chopsticks laid crosswise. They tucked remaining food into the fridge.

"I should have asked earlier," Xie Lian said, "but do you want to brush your teeth? I have a spare." He'd fetched a packaged toothbrush.

"You keep spares?" Hua Cheng smirked, turning it once between his fingers. "Does gege have many overnight guests?"

"It came in a set," Xie Lian said.

A receipt in his wallet, if Hua Cheng ever found it, would show a single item.

When they'd finished brushing their teeth, they observed that the mattress had sunk considerably.

"Let me re-inflate it." Xie Lian withdrew a small electric pump. "It won't take long."

The machine roared to life, shuddering violently in his hands. Yet despite the clamor, the mattress inflated at an agonizingly slow pace.

"It's usually faster than this," he called over the noise, frowning. He noticed air escaping where pump met valve. "The connector's cracked."

He tried to form a seal with his hands, but air continued to hiss through his fingers. After a frustrating minute with little progress, he switched off the pump.

"I'll just blow it manually—" Xie Lian froze and bit his cheek. "I mean blow it up. Inflate it."

"Gege has such strong lungs," Hua Cheng teased. Fine creases gathered at the corner of his eye. "What else can gege blow?"

Xie Lian opened his mouth. His hands fumbled with the pump and nearly sent it to the floor.

"That's—you're—San Lang."

Hua Cheng laughed until his shoulders shook, and Xie Lian watched, unable to turn away.

"San Lang!" he said.

"Sorry, sorry," Hua Cheng said. But he wasn't. His lips twitched; he touched his thumb to them to hide it.

Xie Lian seized the pump with ferocious scrutiny. His neck burned. He pinched his knees together where he knelt. "It's not funny." Yet a smile pulled at his mouth, and he too raised a hand to cover it.

"No? Not even a little?" Hua Cheng smiled. "Here. Give it. You've had a long day."

He took the pump. Chrysanthemums stirred upon his skin, roused by muscle. So lifelike were these flowers, Xie Lian half expected them to shed petals, to find them later scattered across his floor.

After some minutes Hua Cheng tested the mattress' firmness by bouncing his palm into it. "Better?" he asked.

"Should hold through the night," Xie Lian said. "Though by morning..."

"Morning's morning." Hua Cheng's knees cracked as he stood.

Xie Lian nodded, then realized. "San Lang, I only have one pillow."

"Don't need one."

"That's—I can roll up a sweater, or—"

"Gege. I've slept on rocks. Actual rocks. One night absent a pillow won't kill me."

"Fine," Xie Lian huffed. "But if your neck hurts tomorrow, I reserve the right to say I told you so."

Xie Lian perched at the mattress edge and went at the tangles in his hair, brush snagging and catching, his teeth set; you'd think he was trying to punish the hair rather than tame it.

"Here," Hua Cheng said, reaching out. "Let me."

Xie Lian hesitated, then surrendered the brush. Hua Cheng sat behind him. They were close enough that they could feel heat coming off one another. The first stroke was tentative. When Xie Lian didn't flinch, Hua Cheng worked with surer movements, beginning at the ravaged ends and drawing upward.

"Your hair is beautiful," Hua Cheng said. "Silky."

A glow rose in Xie Lian's face. "It's just hair."

"It's *your* hair," Hua Cheng corrected.

Xie Lian pressed his lips together. He softened under Hua Cheng's hands, all save when those fingers, following the brush to smooth the strands, happened upon bare skin at the nape of his neck. Then Xie Lian shivered.

Tangles subdued, Hua Cheng gathered Xie Lian's hair into his hands, combing through it with his fingers in slow, idle passes. "Do you always sleep with it down?"

"Usually," Xie Lian admitted. "I know that's why it tangles."

"I could braid it for you."

"Oh." Xie Lian's fingers found the hem of his shirt again, that faithful scrap of cloth. "Would you—I mean, if you wanted to."

"Of course, gege."

One of Hua Cheng's earrings caught the light as he tilted his head. He was inspecting Xie Lian's hair with the keen attention of a crow, and it was only at this angle, lamplight slanting, that Xie Lian noticed the two silver hoops in Hua Cheng's helix were joined by a small chain.

"Did you do those yourself?" Xie Lian asked, gesturing vaguely. "The piercings."

Hua Cheng touched the hoops. "Some. The rest were done by other people in questionable circumstances."

"Military?"

"Among other places." Hua Cheng said. He gathered Xie Lian's hair again. "May I?"

Xie Lian nodded and turned forward. "No one's ever braided my hair before."

"No?"

"My mother used to cut it when I was little. But she never really styled it."

"I learned in Afghanistan. One of the medics had long hair; she'd have me braid it before surgeries. It's easier when someone else does it."

"That was kind of her," Xie Lian murmured. "Teaching you."

"She was." Then, quieter: "Gege is also very kind."

He produced a black elastic band—the good kind, that did not catch or pull—from his messenger bag, and secured the end of the braid. "There. Should hold until morning."

Xie Lian traced the neat ridges of the plait, then twisted to face Hua Cheng, ready to thank him, when he struck his forehead with the heel of his palm. "Oh—I completely forgot. Your birthday gift!"

"Gege, you didn't have to —"

But Xie Lian was already on his feet, sending the air mattress into a slow, wounded heave. "I made your card last night, and then with everything that happened today I just—it completely slipped my mind."

He hurried across the room to his work bag, forgotten by the door. Hua Cheng watched, amused as Xie Lian rummaged through it, checking each pocket and slot twice over.

"It has to be here somewhere," he muttered, and upended the bag's contents. At least thirty odd things clattered out. "I put it in the front pocket, I swear." Finally his fingers closed around a bent envelope. "Found it!"

He sunk into the mattress with a triumphant look that turned shy as he held out the envelope. "It's not much. Just what you asked for: a handmade card. But... happy birthday, San Lang."

Hua Cheng accepted the envelope with both hands. "Thank you, gege."

"You haven't even seen it yet." Xie Lian fidgeted. "It might be terrible."

"It won't be," Hua Cheng said.

The card was fashioned from high-quality stock, folded with crisp edges. On its front was what appeared to be an attempt at rendering a surgeon in red scrubs, unmistakably, standing in triumph with what might have been surgical instruments raised overhead. The proportions were dubious at best; the figure's arms exceeded all natural length, and the features were simplistic to the point of childishness. But the single eye was lovingly rendered, and there was no mistaking the subject.

Xie Lian watched Hua Cheng's face anxiously. "I told you I'm not artistic."

Hua Cheng's lips curved. "Is this me saving a patient?"

"It's supposed to be." Xie Lian winced. "I think I made your hands look like claws. And the face—faces are hard."

"I love it."

"You don't have to say that."

"I'm not being kind." Hua Cheng looked up. "No one's ever drawn me before."

Inside was Xie Lian's handwriting: elegant, filling the page in neat rows, carefully spaced from beginning to end without waste or haste. The content was plain and heartfelt: an expression of his appreciation for Hua Cheng, unadorned by forced pleasantry. Hua Cheng's eye moved left to right, right to left. Xie Lian half expected him to turn the card upside down and examine it from that angle too, perhaps sideways after that, and couldn't bear to watch, so he stared holes into the worn carpet instead. He'd spent hours the night writing and rewriting until his hand cramped and the waste bin overflowed with discarded attempts. At last, Hua Cheng tucked the card into his bag.

"Is it too much?" Xie Lian asked. "I wasn't sure what to write, and I kept thinking about what you said, about handmade things having meaning, so I wanted to make sure it meant something, but maybe I went overboard, and—"

"Gege. It's perfect."

"Oh." Xie Lian exhaled. "Really?"

"I'll keep this, gege. Thank you."

"The drawing is still terrible," Xie Lian insisted with a self-deprecating smile.

"The drawing," Hua Cheng assured, "is charming. And entirely recognizable as me."

"Only because of the red scrubs and the eye patch. Otherwise it could be anyone with spider hands and a lopsided face."

"Spider hands that save lives," Hua Cheng corrected. "And a very handsome lopsided face."

Both of them laughed, and by the end of it smiled at one another like fuzzy-edged idiots, faces aching, so soft and ripe and sweet were those smiles.

A quietness followed. Xie Lian's eyes grew heavy first. He yawned before he could stop it, pressing the back of his hand to his mouth.

"We should sleep," Hua Cheng said. "It's late."

Only upon nodding did Xie Lian discover how heavy his head had become, and by extension how thoroughly exhausted was the rest of him. He twiddled his thumbs. "San Lang," he ventured, "maybe we could share the pillow?"

"If gege would like."

He twisted around to retrieve the pillow and fluffed it in his lap. "I guess I should get you your own. For next time."

"Next time?" Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian's hands fluttered in excusing gestures. "I mean—if there ever is one—not that I'm expecting—I just meant hypothetically—"

"I would like there to be a next time." Hua Cheng said. "Many next times. If gege is amenable."

Xie Lian melted into a puddle of sweet. He settled his hands. Three breaths. "I would like that too," he whispered, and smiled to himself.

He settled on the bed, back to back, Xie Lian facing the wall, Hua Cheng the room. Their backs touched along the full length of the spine.

"Are you comfortable?" Xie Lian asked.

"Very," Hua Cheng replied.

His voice was a low rumble Xie Lian felt through his back before he heard it. He picked at a hangnail on his thumb.

"San Lang," he said at last.

"Yes, gege?"

"I'm really glad you're here."

Hua Cheng was quiet. Xie Lian felt him breathe in.

"So am I," he said, and for a time neither spoke.

"San Lang?"

"Mm?"

"When I—today, when I thought —" Xie Lian swallowed. "The things I said."

"Gege, you don't have to —"

"No." There was something about the darkness that lent courage; they lay beside one another without sight of each other's faces, and in that blindness certain things became possible that daylight wouldn't permit. "Some things need to be said clearly."

Hua Cheng tilted his head back to listen.

Xie Lian drew what courage he could from the warmth at his back. The hangnail was bleeding now; he could feel the sting of it. "I think I'm falling in love with you, San Lang." A pause, then: "Actually, no. I know I am."

Xie Lian turned over. He wrapped his arm around Hua Cheng's waist and buried his face between the shoulder blades. His heart struck against Hua Cheng's spine—so hard, so fast, that surely it transmitted his terror and exhilaration through skin and bone.

"Gege?"

"Is this okay?" Xie Lian whispered.

Slowly, Hua Cheng's hand found his and covered it. His thumb smoothed the angry hangnail.

"Gege." Hua Cheng's voice had gone rough. "I think you might kill me."

Xie Lian tugged at Hua Cheng's shoulder, coaxing him to turn. Hua Cheng yielded, and they were face to face, so near their noses nearly touched. A strand of hair fell across Hua Cheng's face, stirred by breath; Xie Lian moved it aside. He took Hua Cheng's hand and pressed his lips to the heel of the palm.

Then Hua Cheng's hand was upon his face, and Hua Cheng kissed his forehead. Xie Lian sighed, pleased. Hua Cheng moved to his cheek, then to the corner of his mouth, and at this Xie Lian trembled. He couldn't prevent the thought from rising: how many others had been kissed by these same lips? The thought hurt in a way he hadn't anticipated. Hua Cheng must know so much more of this than he.

Hua Cheng nuzzled against his jaw, breath warm upon his skin. "Is gege okay?"

Xie Lian's heart fluttered. "I'm just... new to this."

Hua Cheng drew back to search his face. Moonlight lay across his features, softening every line until he seemed illusory.

"There's no rush," he said. "I'd wait eight hundred years more if that's what gege wanted."

Xie Lian didn't dare breathe. His hands, trembling where they came to rest on Hua Cheng's shoulders, curled into the muscle there. Their noses bumped; Xie Lian drew back with a small, mortified laugh.

"Sorry," he whispered.

"Don't be."

He tried again, adjusting the angle. His lips found Hua Cheng's, too hard at first, then scarcely there at all, and then their teeth met with a click that ought to have been humiliating but somehow wasn't. Hua Cheng cradled the nape of his neck, fingers threading through the fine hairs there. When their lips met again Hua Cheng's mouth was soft and certain, his lower lip catching Xie Lian's upper, and heat wound itself low in Xie Lian's belly, coiling tight. He gasped as Hua Cheng drew gently at his bottom lip, and when Xie Lian's mouth opened on a sigh, Hua Cheng's tongue slipped in, velvet-soft.

It was nothing like Xie Lian had imagined. Not that he permitted himself to imagine it often, but even then, his mind produced nothing approaching the reality. There was a devotion in the way Hua Cheng kissed him. As though he were something sacred. Something long prayed for and at last received.

They kissed gently, and then more gently still, until kissing became breathing and breathing became sleep. The rain went on tattooing the window, washing the day away, and what remained was two bodies upon a slowly deflating mattress, drawn ever closer by its gradual collapse, as though even that wretched thing, in its quiet dying, conspired to play fate.

The air mattress expired in the night. Xie Lian and Hua Cheng woke prostrate upon bare floor. Hua Cheng slept, nonetheless, through the catastrophe, sprawled face-downward with limbs cast starfish-wide, pillow clutching his cheeks. Xie Lian tried not to laugh. Tonglu's most formidable trauma surgeon, graceless now, and yet no less magnificent for it.

Morning light fell in warm striations across Hua Cheng's back. The chrysanthemum tattoos bloomed anew in the early gold. His hair lay spilled across the pillow like dark water, and Xie Lian extended his fingers toward it before thinking better of the impulse.

He padded to the kitchen and set the kettle to boil. Its low murmur felt suddenly changed. He thought, not without wonder, that the whole apartment had roused to find unexpected company and was endeavoring to receive it well—brighter somehow, admitting birdsong more freely than he could recall. Or perhaps it was only that he was now capable of hearing it.

"Good morning, gege."

Xie Lian nearly lost hold on his mug. He turned to find Hua Cheng propped upon his elbows, eye half-lidded yet fixed upon him with such warmth it resembled nothing so much as a man discovering his favorite flower.

"San Lang." Xie Lian smiled. "Sorry, I didn't mean to wake you."

"You didn't." Hua Cheng stretched. "What are you doing?"

"Making tea." Xie Lian lifted the kettle as evidence. "Did you sleep well? Despite the—" He gestured toward the mattress.

"Better than I have in months," said Hua Cheng, and he appeared to mean it. He crossed to the kitchen in five long strides. "Can I kiss you good morning, gege?"

The directness brought color to Xie Lian's face. "Yes."

Hua Cheng bent and kissed Xie Lian. His thumb moved once, twice against his waist before he pulled away.

"Tea sounds nice," he murmured.

"It's nothing special."

"Everything tastes better when gege makes it."

Xie Lian busied himself with pouring. "Do you need to be at the hospital early?"

"Not until eight." Hua Cheng leaned against the counter. "You?"

"Seven-thirty. West wing today." Xie Lian passed him a mug. "I should get ready. Bathroom's yours after me."

In the mirror, the braid had held though several strands escaped. The bruises on his neck had darkened an angry purple; he prodded them once and looked away. His meeting with Director Jun today resurfaced, and an unsettled feeling bumbled around in his stomach like something preceding nausea. He changed into fresh scrubs and combed his hair, marveled by the soft waves the braid had given it.

Hua Cheng took to the bathroom after and emerged in spare scrubs from his bag.

"How do you do that?" Xie Lian asked.

"Do what?"

"Look so—you. All the time."

The corner of Hua Cheng's mouth lifted. "Practice makes perfect."

They gathered their things. Xie Lian paused at the door, hand on the knob.

"Oh—right. I almost forgot. Director Jun wants me for an after-hours financial review tonight at eight. Something about my administrative experience being useful." Xie Lian said. "You don't mind waiting a little after your shift?"

"Administration," Hua Cheng repeated. "I didn't know you did that."

"A short stint managing department funds back in Wuhan." Xie Lian shrugged.

Hua Cheng had gone still in the way cats do watching a shadow move wrong across a wall. "Did he say what kind of records?"

"Just that my presence would be 'valuable and appreciated.'" Xie Lian mimicked Jun Wu, squaring his shoulders. Hua Cheng didn't smile. "San Lang? Something wrong?"

"Director Jun doesn't strike me as someone who asks maintenance staff for input on financial matters." Hua Cheng's hand came to Xie Lian's shoulder. "Gege, be careful. Director Jun is… complicated."

"I'm sure it'll be fine," Xie Lian said, puzzled.

Hua Cheng nodded. "Then let's go. I don't want gege to be late."

The hallway light stuttered its code as they went down the stairs, their pinkies hooked together.

***

Tonglu General's front entrance was designed to project calm

authority—glass and clean lines, with the hospital's logo rendered in brushed metal above the sliding doors. It was meant to reassure patients and visitors alike, to whisper: you're in good hands.

This morning, however, the scene at the entrance suggested anything but.

"The medical establishment is POISONING you! Big Pharma wants your money, not your health!"

A man in a rumpled suit stood on a plastic milk crate just outside the no-parking zone, waving what appeared to be small glass bottles. His hair stuck out in all directions as if he'd been electrocuted, and his eyes had the wild gleam of the perpetually sleep-deprived. At his feet, a cardboard box overflowed with similar bottles and packets of herbs.

"Sir, for the final time, you cannot solicit on hospital property," Xuan Ji stood before him, arms crossed. "I will call security."

"Call them! They know me well! They're also victims of this corrupt system!" The man thrust a bottle toward a startled visitor. "This tincture cured my neighbor's chronic pain after THREE YEARS of so-called 'medical treatment'!"

"Qi Rong, I swear to god—" Xuan Ji began.

"Swear all you want, sister," Qi Rong cackled. "Your oaths mean nothing when you've sold your soul to pharmaceutical companies!"

Xie Lian felt the blood drain from his face. He momentarily considered turning around and coming in through the service entrance, but Hua Cheng's hand on his lower back propelled him forward.

"Another day at Tonglu," Hua Cheng murmured dryly. "Someone should really check if that man has escaped from the psychiatric ward."

Xie Lian let out a strained laugh. "Um, actually..."

Hua Cheng glanced down at him. "Gege knows him?"

They were close enough now to hear Xuan Ji's increasingly furious tirade.

"—and if I catch you trying to sell your snake oil to one more patient, I will personally ensure you're banned from coming within five hundred feet of this building!"

"My remedies WORK!" Qi Rong shrieked, spittle flying. "Unlike your poison pills!"

"Ah, well..." Xie Lian rubbed the back of his neck, pain flushing his cheeks. "That's... actually my cousin."

Hua Cheng stopped mid-stride. "Your what?"

"My cousin," Xie Lian repeated, quieter this time. "He immigrated here a few years before I did. He... he actually used to be a gastroenterologist at Tonglu."

"Used to be?" Hua Cheng looked between Xie Lian and the shouting man several times, as if trying to reconcile the two.

"Until the, uh, incidents," Xie Lian winced. "Multiple perforated bowels. And then the... alternative medicine phase began."

"CAPITALISM IS THE REAL DISEASE!" Qi Rong howled, now fully engaged in a shouting match with Xuan Ji, who looked ready to tackle him to the ground.

"I'd heard about a disgraced doctor selling homeopathic remedies outside the hospital," Hua Cheng said slowly. "I had no idea he was your relative."

"It's not something I advertise," Xie Lian admitted. "We're not exactly... close."

"COUSIN!" Qi Rong suddenly screeched, spotting them. "COME TELL THEM THE TRUTH! TELL THEM HOW THE SYSTEM FAILS PEOPLE!"

Xie Lian froze. "We should probably go inside."

"Agreed," Hua Cheng said, wedging himself between Xie Lian and his raving cousin. "Though I have to say, this explains some things about gege."

"Like what?" Xie Lian asked, hurrying toward the entrance.

"Your remarkable tolerance," Hua Cheng gave a small smile. "And your compassion for difficult people."

Qi Rong was now attempting to pursue them, but Xuan Ji caught him by the collar of his suit jacket. "Oh no you don't—"

"COUSIN! DON'T BE A COWARD!" Qi Rong's voice followed them through the sliding doors and into the hospital lobby. "YOU KNOW I'M RIGHT! REMEMBER WHAT HAPPENED IN WUHAN?"

Xie Lian winced, walking faster. "I'm sorry about that," he said once they were safely inside. "He's... well, he hasn't been the same since he lost his license."

"You have nothing to apologize for," Hua Cheng assured him. "We don't choose our family."

"No," Xie Lian agreed, glancing back toward the entrance where security had finally arrived to assist. "But sometimes I wish I could choose a different cousin."

Hua Cheng laughed. "If it helps, I think most people feel that way about at least one relative."

"Even you?"

"Even me," Hua Cheng confirmed. "West wing, you said?"

"Yes, that's where I start today," Xie Lian nodded.

The elevator doors opened, revealing a mercifully empty car. As they stepped inside, the distant sounds of Qi Rong's protests faded, replaced by the soft hum of machinery. The doors closed with a gentle whoosh, sealing them in momentary privacy.

Hua Cheng's hand found Xie Lian's, fingers interlacing. "Shall I see gege at lunch?"

"I'd like that," Xie Lian smiled. "Cafeteria at noon?"

"It's a date," Hua Cheng confirmed, squeezing his hand once before releasing it as the elevator slowed to a stop on the ground floor.

***

The supply closet door clicked shut behind Xie Lian as he pushed his cart into the hallway. The morning had been relatively peaceful—straightening waiting rooms, wiping down surfaces, restocking dispensers—mundane work that left his mind free to wander. And wander it did, primarily to San Lang and the night they'd shared, to kisses, to strong shoulders.

The west wing's administrative corridor should have been quiet at this hour. Most department heads were either in meetings or making rounds, leaving the hallway a perfect opportunity for Xie Lian to dust the awards and accolades that lined the walls without interruption.

What he didn't expect was the thumping bass that vibrated through the floor as he rounded the corner.

"Lower! You gotta get lower!"

Shi Qingxuan's voice carried through the corridor, followed by what sounded like enthusiastic clapping. Xie Lian slowed his cart, peering cautiously ahead.

The scene that greeted him defied all reasonable expectation.

Dr. Pei Ming—esteemed head of Cardiothoracic Surgery,

whose hands had literally held beating hearts—was in the middle of the hallway performing what could only be described as an attempt to, as the young people said, "throw it back." His lab coat was discarded on a nearby chair. Beside him, a younger man who bore a striking resemblance to Pei Ming was executing the same movements with more success.

"Little Pei, yasssss!" Shi Qingxuan cheered, phone held high. "Slaaayyy queeennn, work it! Work that sexy butt! Now both of you together—yes! Ortho bros throwing it back!"

Pei Ming attempted to match his brother's fluid motion but managed only a jerky approximation that made him look like he was having a minor seizure.

"No, no" Pei Xiu straightened up to demonstrate again. "Too stiff. It's all in the hips, like this." He performed a smooth body roll.

"I am a board-certified cardiothoracic surgeon," Pei Ming huffed, hands on his knees as he caught his breath. "I've performed triple bypasses that made the impossible possible. My hands are registered as lethal weapons in twelve states. I don't need to be good at..." he waved vaguely, "...whatever this is."

"It's called being culturally relevant," Shi Qingxuan replied, adjusting the phone angle. "And this TikTok is going to blow up. 'Ortho Bros.'"

"I'm not orthopedics," Pei Ming protested. "I'm cardiothoracic."

"But Little Pei is," Shi Qingxuan dismissed with a flick of his wrist. "The vibes are giving ortho right now, and that's what matters for engagement. Now try it again, but this time when the beat drops, both of you need to hit that woah!"

Xie Lian froze, caught between retreating to spare them embarrassment and proceeding with his work. The decision was made for him when Shi Qingxuan spotted him.

"Xie-ge!" Shi Qingxuan's face lit up. "Perfect timing! We need

an audience reaction shot!"

Pei Ming snapped straight and put on his nonchalance. "Xie Lian," he acknowledged with a curt nod. "I was just, ah, participating in a staff morale initiative. We're making Shi Qingxuan's social media famous. Apparently, medical professionals who can dance get millions of views."

"It's true," Shi Qingxuan nodded vigorously. "A neurosurgeon in Boston went viral last month just for doing the griddy between surgeries."

"I see," Xie Lian said carefully, unsure what the appropriate response might be. He pushed his cart forward, intending to continue with his dusting. "Don't mind me, I'll just work around you."

"Nonsense!" Shi Qingxuan bounded over and grabbed Xie Lian's arm. "You have to join us! The janitor reveal would be such a plot twist. Viewers eat that up."

"Oh, I don't think—" Xie Lian began.

"He's not wrong," Little Pei nodded. "Cross-department collabs are huge right now."

"I really can't dance," Xie Lian protested weakly.

"Neither can my brother," Little Pei added, dodging the swat Pei Ming aimed at his head. "That's not stopping him from trying to throw it back like he's still in college."

"I never did this in college," Pei Ming objected.

"And it shows," Shi Qingxuan said sympathetically, patting Pei Ming's shoulder. "But we can fix that. The hospital needs to see that its esteemed cardiothoracic surgeon has a human side."

Pei Ming looked torn between offense and preening at being called 'esteemed.'

"What exactly are you filming?" Xie Lian asked, hoping the question might somehow extract him from participation.

"It's a series," Shi Qingxuan explained, gesturing with his phone. "Hospital staff showing off their hidden talents. We've already got He Xuan doing his death stare—which, lowkey, is no different from his regular face, but the comments are eating it up. Feng Xin did his impression of Director Jun, which was high-key terrifying. And Mu Qing..." he trailed off, then frowned. "Actually, Mu Qing refused to participate. Said it was 'beneath the dignity of medical professionals.'"

"Sounds like Mu Qing," Xie Lian agreed.

"So what do you say?" Shi Qingxuan looked at him expectantly. "We need a maintenance staff representative."

"I..." Xie Lian glanced down the hallway, calculating his escape routes.

"Don't pressure him," Pei Ming intervened, perhaps out of solidarity with another reluctant participant. "Besides, we should be wrapping this up. I have a meeting in fifteen minutes."

Shi Qingxuan pouted. "Fine, but we're at least finishing this take. Places, everyone!"

To Xie Lian's relief, 'everyone' apparently did not include him. He stepped aside with his cart as Shi Qingxuan repositioned the brothers in the center of the hallway.

The music blasted from Shi Qingxuan's phone, and the Pei brothers launched into their routine. Pei Ming, for his part, seemed to have improved marginally, though his movements still had the mechanical quality of someone who had memorized steps rather than felt them.

"Now drop it low!" Shi Qingxuan directed, his free hand making encouraging circles. "Lower! Lower! Yes! Now hold the pose —perfect!"

The final pose had Little Pei in a dramatic lunge while Pei Ming attempted to mirror him, though with considerably less flexibility. Shi Qingxuan circled them, capturing the moment from multiple angles before finally declaring it a wrap.

"That's going to break the internet," he announced, already tapping away at his phone. "The hashtags alone will carry this to the explore page."

"What hashtags?" Pei Ming asked suspiciously.

"Oh, you know," Shi Qingxuan waved vaguely. "#MedicalThirst, #DoctorDaddy, #ScrubsButMakeItSexy... the usual."

***

Tonglu General Family 🏥❤

107 new messages

Shi Qingxuan [11:23 AM]

NEW TIKTOK JUST DROPPED 🔥🔥🔥

[Video: Pei Ming and Little Pei performing their dance routine]

the pei bros throwing it BACK for the medical community!!! already at 2k views in 10 minutes!!! NO CRUMBS!!! 🕊

Pei Ming [11:24 AM]

I look good. Send me the link so I can share it with my residents.

He Xuan [11:24 AM]

I'm performing an autopsy. Please stop making my phone vibrate.

Shi Qingxuan [11:25 AM]

he xuan being a hater touch grass

He Xuan [11:25 AM]

I literally have my hands inside a human chest cavity right now.

Ling Wen [11:26 AM]

Please remember this is a professional chat intended for hospital communication.

Shi Wudu [11:26 AM]

Those movements could cause significant lumbar strain.

Pei Ming [11:27 AM]

My back is FINE. Unlike some people, I maintain PEAK physical condition.

Shi Wudu [11:27 AM]

Your form suggests otherwise.

Mu Qing [11:28 AM]

Can we change the group name to something more professional? "Tonglu General Family" sounds like we're in kindergarten. Can’t we just use secure chat?

Shi Qingxuan [11:28 AM]

no ❤

Feng Xin [11:29 AM]

@Pei Ming I can give u some dance pointers if u want.

Little Pei [11:30 AM]

Thank you for including me in the video.

Xuan Ji [11:32 AM]

@Shi Qingxuan That deranged man is back outside the hospital. The one selling "miracle cures." Security is dealing with him for the third time this week.

Shi Qingxuan [11:32 AM]

qi rong out there fighting the system AGAIN?? skibidi toilet fr

Mu Qing [11:33 AM]

What does that even MEAN?

Lang Qianqiu [11:33 AM]

I'll be out of office until next Tuesday. All ophthalmology consults should be directed to Dr. Glaucomfleken.

Shi Qingxuan [11:34 AM]

we can see them in clinic 😂😂😂

Lang Qianqiu [11:34 AM]

That is correct. They can be seen in clinic.

Shi Qingxuan [11:34 AM]

LMAO IT WAS A JOKE because you're an eye doctor and "see them" GET IT

Lang Qianqiu [11:35 AM]

I see.

Feng Xin [11:35 AM]

ANOTHER EYE JOKE!!!!

Pei Ming [11:36 AM]

@Shi Qingxuan How many views are we at now?

Ling Wen [11:36 AM]

I need the quarterly budget reports from all department heads by EOD. This is your second reminder.

Shi Qingxuan [11:37 AM]

3.5K AND CLIMBING!!! you're going viral pei ming!!! fame era unlocked!!!

Pei Ming [11:37 AM]

As expected. I've always had star quality.

He Xuan [11:38 AM]

still elbow-deep in viscera.

Shi Qingxuan [11:38 AM]

Why are you LIKE this 😭

Hua Cheng [11:39 AM]

@Feng Xin I need the labor & delivery surgical suite at 3pm for an emergency C-section. My patient has a placental abruption.

Feng Xin [11:39 AM]

we have a scheduled delivery at 3. can u wait till 4?

Hua Cheng [11:40 AM]

No.

Feng Xin [11:40 AM]

fine. i'll reschedule.

Shi Qingxuan [11:41 AM]

the way hua cheng just said "No." IS SENDING ME 💀 💀 💀

Mu Qing [11:41 AM]

@Feng Xin That's the third time this month you've given up OR time without a fight. Grow a spine.

Feng Xin [11:42 AM]

it's a legitimate EMERGENCY u DOORKNOB

Shi Wudu [11:42 AM]

Interesting how Hua Cheng's "emergencies" always take priority.

Hua Cheng [11:43 AM]

Interesting how your surgeries are cosmetic procedures.

Shi Qingxuan [11:43 AM]

THE TEA IS SCALDING ☕🔥🔥🔥

Ling Wen [11:44 AM]

@Shi Wudu I still need your budget report.

@Pei Ming Yours as well.

@He Xuan Please submit your morgue supply inventory.

Director Jun [11:45 AM]

Good morning, everyone. I trust all departments are functioning efficiently today.

[Chat goes silent for 30 seconds]

Shi Qingxuan [11:45 AM]

good morning director jun! everything is AMAZING!

Director Jun [11:46 AM]

Excellent. I look forward to seeing the quarterly reports this afternoon. Carry on.

Ling Wen [11:47 AM]

Thank you, Director Jun.

[Director Jun was removed from the chat by Shi Wudu]

Ling Wen [11:47 AM]

@Shi Wudu Please add Director Jun back immediately.

Shi Wudu [11:47 AM]

Oops. Finger slipped.

Shi Qingxuan [11:47 AM]

LMAO LEGEND BEHAVIOR 💀 💀 💀

Mu Qing [11:48 AM]

This is EXACTLY why we can't have a professional workplace.

Ling Wen [11:48 AM]

I've added him back to the emergency management chat. He might not notice for a while.

Shi Qingxuan [11:49 AM]

ling wen with the save!!! she understood the assignment!!

Ling Wen [11:49 AM]

I did no such thing. I'm simply prioritizing communication channels.

Quan Yizhen [11:52 AM]

has anyone seen the coffee machine from the surgeons lounge?

Hua Cheng [11:52 AM]

It's in the same place it's always been.

Quan Yizhen [11:53 AM]

im looking right at where it should be. not there.

He Xuan [11:53 AM]

pei ming took it to his office yesterday.

Pei Ming [11:54 AM]

It's a temporary loan. My office machine broke.

Hua Cheng [11:54 AM]

Return it.

Pei Ming [11:55 AM]

I'm in surgery.

Yin Yu [11:55 AM]

No, you're not. You're in your office. I just walked past.

Shi Qingxuan [11:55 AM]

EXPOSED 💀 💀 💀

Pei Ming [11:56 AM]

FINE. I'll bring it back after lunch.

Hua Cheng [11:56 AM]

Now.

Pei Ming [11:57 AM]

Fine.

Guoshi [11:58 AM]

the pharmacy computer system is down. all medication orders need to be submitted manually until further notice.

Mu Qing [11:58 AM]

Again? That's the third time this month.

Guoshi [11:59 AM]

this insurance auth is gonna be my 13th reason.

Shi Qingxuan [11:59 AM]

NOOO GUOSHI DON'T BE DELULU 😭

Guoshi [12:00 PM]

what?

Xuan Ji [12:01 PM]

@All Nurses' station on floor 3 will have donuts for the next hour.

Shi Qingxuan [12:01 PM]

OMWWWWW

He Xuan [12:02 PM]

finally finished the autopsy. leaving my phone in the morgue for the rest of the day.

Shi Qingxuan [12:02 PM]

bring me a donut? □☞☜

He Xuan [12:03 PM]

no.

Shi Qingxuan [12:03 PM]

□□□

Feng Xin [12:05 PM]

UPDATE: just checked the donuts. they're the cheap kind from the gas station. 🕳

Xuan Ji [12:06 PM]

They were donated. Be grateful.

Hua Cheng [12:10 PM]

@Xie Lian Still on for lunch?

Shi Qingxuan [12:10 PM]

❣❣❣❣❣❣❣❣❣❣

Xie Lian stared at the screen, thumb hovering over the keyboard. He'd been silently watching the conversation unfold and had forgotten he was even in this chat until Hua Cheng tagged him directly.

Before he could respond, new messages flooded in:

Shi Qingxuan [12:11 PM]

omg are xie-ge and dr. hua having *lunch* together??

Feng Xin [12:11 PM]

they carpool. of course they eat together. □

Shi Qingxuan [12:11 PM]

It's giving ROMANCE, besties

Mu Qing [12:12 PM]

Can we please keep personal matters off the professional chat?

Xie Lian felt heat rising to his cheeks.

Xie Lian [12:13 PM]

@Hua Cheng Yes, see you in the cafeteria. 12:30

***

The cafeteria buzzed—trays clattering, conversations overlapping, the occasional overhead page briefly rising above the din before being swallowed again by collective noise. Xie Lian checked his watch: 12:34. He'd secured a small table in the corner, positioning himself where he could see both entrances.

San Lang was late, which was unusual. Hua Cheng had never once been anything but precisely punctual at the times he promised. If he said 12:30, he appeared at 12:30, not 12:29, not 12:31.

Xie Lian absently arranged the napkins and salt packets on the table into neat rows. Perhaps a last-minute consultation? Or paperwork that couldn't wait? He wasn't concerned—not really. Emergencies were the constant backdrop of hospital life. He knew better than most how quickly priorities could shift.

By 12:37, with no message and no sign of Hua Cheng, Xie Lian decided to go looking. He had limited time left in his lunch break, and the missed opportunity to spend it with San Lang felt like a small loss he wasn't willing to accept without at least trying.

Besides, what if San Lang needed help?

The ER seemed like the most logical place to start. If an emergency had come in, that's where Hua Cheng would be. He made his way down, passing familiar faces who nodded. The maintenance staff traveled everywhere in the hospital; they were the silent, near-invisible infrastructure that kept everything running smoothly.

The emergency department was in one of its rare lulls—busy enough that no one was sitting idle, but without the frenetic energy of a major trauma. Xie Lian scanned the area, looking for the distinctive red scrubs that set Hua Cheng apart from everyone else. Not in the trauma bay... not at the nurses' station...

He finally spotted him in one of the small workrooms off the main area. Hua Cheng stood with his back to the door, leaning over the desk with his messenger bag open beside him, sorting through papers and placing some in the bag.

"San Lang?" he said, reaching out to tap Hua Cheng's shoulder gently.

Hua Cheng whirled around, his arm sweeping up in an arc that would have struck Xie Lian if he hadn't instinctively stepped back. For a split second, Hua Cheng's eye was like an arrow shot through smoke, locked on some point beyond the present.

Xie Lian stumbled back, his shoulder knocking into a shelving unit, sending a stack of folders sliding to the floor with a sharp slap.

The sound seemed to snap Hua Cheng back.

"Gege—" It came out strangled. Hua Cheng's hand dropped to his side. Color drained from his face as he looked genuinely

horrified with himself.

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian said, still pressed against the shelves. His heart was jumping. "I didn't mean to startle you."

"No, I should apologize. I'm so sorry, gege." Hua Cheng knelt to gather the fallen folders. "Did I hurt you?"

"No," Xie Lian said, bending to help. "I just wasn't expecting..." He trailed off, unsure how to describe what had just happened without sounding accusatory.

Their hands brushed as they reached for the same folder.

"I'm sorry about lunch." Hua Cheng gripped one of the folders tight, bending a crease into it before he realized and set it on the desk. "There was a code blue in the hallway on my way. Elderly man, sudden cardiac arrest. Once we stabilized him, I came here to document it." He looked genuinely regretful. "I should have had Yin Yu deal with it."

"It's alright. I understand emergencies," Xie Lian assured him. "I'm just glad I found you."

Hua Cheng's posture relaxed then. "Are you still free for lunch, gege? I can have Yin Yu finish this paperwork."

Xie Lian smiled. That was more like the San Lang he knew.

"I'd like that," Xie Lian said. "If you're sure Yin Yu won't mind."

"He won't." Hua Cheng gathered the papers into a neat stack and picked up a nearby phone, pressing a single button. "Yin Yu. The documentation for the code blue needs finishing. I'm taking lunch now." He hung up without waiting for a response.

As they walked toward the cafeteria, Xie Lian noticed that Hua Cheng kept a small distance wedged between them. The incident had clearly unsettled him as much as it had Xie Lian, though he was trying hard not to show it.

"San Lang," Xie Lian said as they waited for the elevator. "Are you alright?"

Hua Cheng looked over. "Why does gege ask?”

"You seem..." Xie Lian searched for the right word, "distant."

The elevator doors opened—empty again. Hua Cheng pressed the button for the cafeteria floor, then turned to face Xie Lian fully.

"I’m sorry, gege. Sometimes I... forget where I am."

"Does that happen often?"

"No." Hua Cheng look away. "Only when I'm caught off guard."

Xie Lian reached out and took Hua Cheng's hand. After hesitation, Hua Cheng's fingers curled around his, warm and solid.

The cafeteria had filled considerably since Xie Lian left. Lunch rush was in full swing, residents and nurses crowding around tables, the line for hot food stretching nearly to the door. Xie Lian felt Hua Cheng's hand flex around his as they approached the swinging double-doors, then go slack when he spotted an empty table in the far corner.

"You grab the table and I'll grab food?" Hua Cheng nodded toward the table. "What would gege like to eat?"

"Just a sandwich is fine," Xie Lian replied.

Hua Cheng hesitated. "Are you sure that's enough?"

"It's plenty," Xie Lian assured him, smiling. "I'm not very hungry."

This wasn't entirely true—he was, in fact, quite hungry—but his maintenance salary didn't stretch to elaborate cafeteria meals, and he'd rather save the money for a proper mattress, lest he have San Lang spend another night with him on the floor.

Hua Cheng was ready to protest, but nodded. "I'll be right back."

Xie Lian weaved through the crowd toward the small table tucked against the wall; it wasn't ideal—the chair on one side wobbled—but it offered relative privacy compared to the communal tables in the center of the room, so he settled into the wobbly chair and watched Hua Cheng navigate the food line, cutting through the crowd with such natural authority that people seemed to part for him without even realizing they were doing so.

Across the cafeteria, Shi Qingxuan was gesticulating wildly to a stone-faced He Xuan, who appeared to be timing how long he could go without blinking, or playing the part of one of the corpses he so loved, often remarking how they "never talked more than they needed to."

Nearby, Mu Qing and Feng Xin sat in tense silence, though

occasionally one would mutter something that made the other roll his eyes, and Xie Lian smiled fondly at the memories it brought back.

"Stop staring, you'll make them self-conscious," came Hua Cheng's voice. He'd returned balancing a tray loaded with far more food than just two sandwiches.

"I wasn't—" Xie Lian began, then laughed. "Okay, maybe I was."

Hua Cheng set down the tray: two sandwiches, a bowl of soup, salad, and two desserts—both rice pudding. He slid the tray across to Xie Lian's side of the table.

"This is too much," Xie Lian protested.

Hua Cheng took his seat. "Gege should eat more."

"San Lang..."

"Eat what you want. I'll finish the rest."

There was something almost desperate in the way Hua Cheng pushed the food toward him, as if trying to make amends for the earlier incident through sustenance, and Xie Lian couldn't refuse.

"Thank you," he conceded, unwrapping one of the sandwiches. Tomato and turkey on wheat bread—exactly what he would have chosen for himself.

Hua Cheng leaned on the table, head propped up in his palm as he watched Xie Lian chew. "How's your day been so far?"

Xie Lian swallowed his bite and pushed the soup towards Hua Cheng. "Relatively uneventful, actually. Though I did witness Pei Ming attempting to 'throw it back' in the administrative corridor."

"I'm sorry—what?"

"Shi Qingxuan was filming him and Little Pei for a TikTok video. They were dancing."

"Throwing it back…" Hua Cheng frowned as if such verbage was wholly foreign.

"Trying to, at least. It wasn't very successful."

"I'm sorry I missed seeing it." The corner of Hua Cheng's mouth quirked up. "Though maybe it's better for Pei Ming's dignity that I did."

"I think Shi Qingxuan posted it in the group chat if you wanted to see it."

"Maybe later." Hua Cheng pushed the soup back toward Xie Lian. "Try it. The cafeteria occasionally produces a decent hot and sour soup."

Xie Lian accepted the bowl, watching Hua Cheng over its rim as he took a cautious sip. The soup was surprisingly good—spicy enough to make his nose tingle, with the perfect balance of sour to cut through the heat.

"This is delicious," he said, taking another spoonful.

"I thought you might like it," Hua Cheng replied, looking pleased with himself.

They ate and shared comfortable talk, both of them relaxing into the simple pleasure of sharing a meal even if of questionable quality. Xie Lian became so absorbed in their little bubble that he barely noticed the approaching figure until a shadow fell across the table.

"Ah, Dr. Hua. Just the person I was looking for."

Director Jun stood beside their table, tall enough to cast them both in shadow, his white coat unwrinkled despite a full morning's work. Xie Lian felt himself instinctively sitting straighter, brushing crumbs off his scrubs with one hand before smoothing

them out.

"Director," Hua Cheng acknowledged. "Is there something I can help you with?"

"There is," Director Jun smiled. "I'd like to discuss the trauma department's quarterly review. When might you be available?"

"You can speak with my assistant to schedule something," Hua Cheng replied, taking another bite of his sandwich and not looking Jun Wu's way. "Yin Yu handles my appointments."

Were Jun Wu perturbed by Hua Cheng's dismissal, he didn't care to show it. Instead, he looked to Xie Lian, frozen so stiffly where he sat that he might've been preparing himself to have his wrists slapped.

"Mr. Xie. I trust we're still on for our meeting this evening at eight o'clock?"

Xie Lian nodded hastily. "Yes, Director. I'll be there."

"Excellent," Director Jun's smile widened and appeared genuine this time, though the effect was somehow more unsettling than warming. "I look forward to our discussion."

He turned back to Hua Cheng. "You should be proud of your team, Dr. Hua. The trauma response times have improved significantly under your leadership. The board has taken notice."

"That's nice," Hua Cheng replied evenly.

"Always so difficult," Director Jun said with a small, placating laugh. "In any case, I won't interrupt your lunch any further. Mr. Xie, I'll see you this evening."

With a nod, he made off, stopping at Shi Wudu's table to make a quick remark about something before continuing out of the cafeteria.

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The afternoon passed in routine: leaving his sticky notes in free moments, mopping spills, replacing light bulbs in patient rooms, making small talk with them as he went about it. In between the conversations, his mind would hop and skip its way to San Lang, where he played over and over—at least a dozen times—their conversation in the elevator, then thought about Hua Cheng's defensive move in the workroom. Xie Lian wondered (not for the first time) about Hua Cheng's life in detail, realizing what little he knew about it. What kind of things had Hua Cheng seen or done; what experiences had he gone through?

And then there was the looming meeting with Director Jun, which brought about an uneasy feeling Xie Lian couldn't shake, though he couldn't put his finger on either and thus tried to dismiss it, but San Lang's concern only amplified his gut feeling. Did he know something about Director Jun, or was it just the distaste all people had for their bosses?

By the time his shift ended at six, Xie Lian had worked himself into such a nervous state that nothing could keep him still. He considered texting San Lang but decided against it—he would likely still be finishing his own shift, and Xie Lian didn't want to disturb him.

Instead, he made his way to the maintenance break room in the basement to change out of his scrubs, hoping that it hadn’t somehow flooded in his absence, as it had last month. The room was empty when he arrived (and dry, luckily), with the other maintenance staff having either gone home or still out on their assignments. He changed into the spare set of clothes he kept in his locker—slacks and a simple button-down shirt that had seen better days but was still presentable enough.

With two hours to kill, Xie Lian decided to head to the hospital library. It was usually quiet at this hour and he could review some medical journals. He found comfort in keeping up with advances in his field, even if it was bittersweet to read about techniques and technologies he would never have the opportunity to use.

The library was deserted, as he'd hoped. He selected a few recent neurosurgery journals and settled into a comfortable chair in the corner. Time slipped away as he fell into articles about new approaches to glioblastoma treatment, innovative imaging techniques, and advances in microsurgical tools. When he next checked his watch next, it was 7:45, so he returned the journals to their shelves and made his way to the administrative wing.

The hallway was eerily quiet, most of the administrative staff having gone home hours ago, and those who remained were quiet, crepuscular creatures, indifferent to the sound of Xie Lian clicking down the linoleum walkway towards the heavy oak door marked "Jun Wu, Director."

He paused outside, straightening his shirt and taking a deep breath before knocking, firm-fisted.

"Enter," came Director Jun's voice from within.

Xie Lian opened the door to find Director Jun seated behind a large, curved mahogany desk (which he thought looked like a kidney bean), and two yellowing lamps set to warm, low light.

"Ah, Mr. Xie. Right on time." Director Jun gestured to the chair across from him. "Please, have a seat."

Xie Lian closed the door behind him and approached the desk, doing his best to project confidence.

"Thank you for making time to meet with me, Director Jun," he said, settling into the chair.

"The pleasure is mine. I've been looking forward to this conversation for quite some time."

"You mentioned reviewing financial records?"

"Yes," Director Jun opened a drawer and removed a thick file folder, placing it on the desk. "But first, I'd like to discuss something else." He leaned forward, his fingers steepled beneath his chin. "Tell me, Mr. Xie... I understand you managed departmental finances at

Wuhan Union Hospital; is that correct?"

Xie Lian shifted in his chair. "Briefly, yes. It was a secondary role."

"And yet from what I gather, you showed quite a talent for it. Especially in finding innovative solutions to budget constraints."

"I only followed standard protocols," Xie Lian smiled. "Nothing innovative about it."

"Too modest," Director Jun said. "An admirable quality if sometimes misplaced."

File in hand, he wheeled his ergonomic chair around to Xie Lian's side, settling close enough that their knees almost touched.

"Let me show you something," he said, thumbing through the file. His cologne—something expensive and woody—was so strong that Xie Lian had to stop his nose from wrinkling. "You see these numbers here?"

Xie Lian leaned away to create a more professional distance without being obvious, but Director Jun didn't seem to notice—or chose not to—as he flipped to another number-slogged page. "These represent our reported equipment expenditures last quarter. Now, look at this."

He leaned forward to pivot his computer monitor toward them both, displaying a spreadsheet filled with more numbers and account codes. As Xie Lian leaned forward to examine it, Director Jun rested a hand on his thigh just above the knee.

Xie Lian froze, caught off-guard and unsure how to respond to a gesture like that; it was subtle enough that objecting might seem like an overreaction. So, he tried to ignore it and focus on the spreadsheet.

"These figures..." he began, relieved when Jun Wu removed his hand to point at numbers, then disappointed when it returned.

"Reflect the realities of modern healthcare economics," Director Jun finished for him, returning to his side of the desk. "Tonglu operates on thin margins, Mr. Xie. Insurance reimbursements shrink yearly while costs rise. Department heads fight over limited resources, equipment becomes outdated, and patients suffer." His fingers tapped across his keyboard, pulling up another document. "But with the right reallocations, resources can be optimized."

Xie Lian studied the screen and felt a knot start to form in his stomach, slowly pulling tighter. The trauma department budget showed substantial funds allocated for equipment upgrades that Xie Lian knew hadn't happened. Radiology showed billing for procedures at rates far above standard. Several research grants appeared to have been diverted to administrative "overhead."

"These reallocations," Xie Lian stepped carefully, "don't appear to be reaching their intended destinations."

"Don't they?" Director Jun's eyebrow arched. "Or is it that the funds are being directed to areas of greater need? Healthcare is complex, Mr. Xie. Sometimes the greater good requires flexibility in how we interpret regulatory guidelines."

"Flexibility…" Xie Lian repeated, frowning. "Director Jun, with all due respect, this looks like—"

"Strategic management. Revenue cycle optimization. Cost-containment initiatives. All essential practices in today's challenging healthcare landscape."

"But the trauma department's budget shows a substantial allocation for equipment that Dr. Hua has been requesting for months. Equipment they haven't received."

"Ah, yes. Dr. Hua." Director Jun's smile cooled enough to substitute as a morgue. "He's persistent, isn't he? Always advocating for his department without understanding the broader financial ecosystem we operate within. Those funds have been reallocated to more pressing matters."

"Such as?" Xie Lian pressed.

Director Jun clicked his mouse, closing the spreadsheet. "Such as keeping this hospital solvent, Mr. Xie… We all make sacrifices for the greater good."

Everything began clicking into place. The funding discrepancies, equipment promised but never delivered, "reallocations" that vanished into administrative black holes.

"What you're describing," Xie Lian paused to consider his words more prudently, "this sounds like it crosses ethical and legal boundaries."

"Legal boundaries are drawn by those who don't understand the realities of hospital administration," Director Jun replied. "What I'm describing is survival in an industry where the rules are stacked against institutions like ours."

"I'm not sure what you expect from me, Director Jun."

"To start, your discretion. Beyond that, your expertise. Your time managing funds at Wuhan Union gave you insights into healthcare financial systems that could be beneficial to Tonglu's continued operation."

"My expertise in standard accounting practices wouldn't be helpful for what you're describing," Xie Lian said.

"On the contrary," Director Jun leaned forward again, and Xie Lian resisted the urge to lean back. "Your experience navigating institutional structures would be invaluable. Especially given your unique experience in how institutions sometimes require scapegoats to preserve their reputations. You understand that better than most, right? It would be terrible if we had to blame this hospital's financial failures on those who don't deserve it. You *must* be sensible."

Xie Lian's mouth went dry, then watery in the way that precedes sick. "I'm not sure what you mean…"

"Let me be direct then, Mr. Xie. I've been watching you for some time now. A brilliant neurosurgeon reduced to mopping floors—it's a waste. Particularly when your insights could be valuable elsewhere in the organization."

"I'm content with my current position," Xie Lian insisted.

"Are you?" Director Jun narrowed his eyes, dissected Xie Lian with their scalpel-likeness. "A man who once held lives in his hands, who pioneered surgical techniques that saved patients deemed beyond hope—now relegated to emptying trash bins and cleaning toilets? I find that difficult to believe."

Xie Lian put his head down, unsure what to say.

"In any case," Director Jun continued when it became clear Xie Lian wouldn't respond, "I didn't invite you here to discuss your career choices, though we may circle back to that topic. I invited you because I believe we can be of mutual benefit to each other and to Tonglu General."

"And what would that entail?"

"For now? Nothing major." Director Jun leaned back, crossing his legs. "I'd have you review some financial documentation for accuracy. Suggest reallocations where you think appropriate. Apply your expertise to ensure our resources are being directed efficiently. In return, your position at Tonglu remains secure. And perhaps, in time, we might discuss opportunities more befitting your talents. Administrative roles. Consulting positions. Maybe even a path back to medicine. This hospital has a scholarship program for employees who meet the requirements; I could put you back through medical school."

"What if I'm not interested?" Xie Lian asked.

Director Jun's expression turned irritable before resetting into that sleek stainless steel professionalism. "I would find that disappointing. Especially given how generous Tonglu has been in overlooking certain aspects of your background. Your hiring was unconventional; I'm sure you know. Dr. Mu's recommendation

carried a lot of weight, but had the board known the full circumstances of your departure from Wuhan—well, I imagine things might have gone differently."

"I did nothing wrong," Xie Lian shot back defensively.

"Maybe not," Director Jun conceded. "But perception often matters more than reality, doesn't it? Especially when it comes to matters of public health and safety. I'm doubtful you would have a job anywhere if word got out."

He opened a drawer and removed another folder—this one thinner—and slid it across the desk. "A news article from the South China Morning Post. I assume you remember it? Your name features prominently."

Xie Lian didn't need to open the folder to know its contents. The headlines had been burned into his memory: accusations, misrepresentations, his reputation destroyed by forces beyond his control. He'd been designated the fall guy, the convenient out when officials needed someone to blame. His medical career had ended virtually overnight and it was something of luck that being stripped of his medical license was the worst of it.

"I need time to think," Xie Lian said finally.

"Of course," Director Jun replied, sliding a USB drive across the desk. "Take this. Review the files at your leisure. We'll speak again next week."

Xie Lian hesitated, then picked up the drive, slipping it into his pocket.

"Remember, Mr. Xie," Director Jun added as he stood to see Xie Lian out, "discretion is paramount. This conversation remains between us."

"And if I decide I can't help you?" Xie Lian paused at the door.

Director Jun placed his hand on Xie Lian's lower back,

guiding him forward with gentle pressure; it felt like warm juice seeping through the fabric to his skin. "I'm confident you'll make the right decision. For everyone's sake. Wouldn't it be a shame if Dr. Hua discovered the real reason behind your fall from grace? He seems quite protective of you."

Xie Lian's hand tightened on the doorknob. "Leave San Lang out of this."

"San Lang?" Director Jun's eyebrows rose. "How familiar. I wasn't aware you and Dr. Hua were on such intimate terms."

"We're friends," Xie Lian said stiffly.

"I see." Director Jun's expression suggested he saw far too much. "Well, friendship is valuable in our line of work. As is loyalty. I trust you'll remember where your loyalties should lie, Mr. Xie."

Without another word, Xie Lian left the office, and the door clicked shut, soft and silent on its hinges. The empty hallway stretched so much further and dimmer than it had minutes ago. He took three steps and found he couldn't take a fourth. His legs stopped functioning and he staggered sideways until his shoulder hit the wall, grateful for its solidity as the floor began to tilt and waver.

His heartbeat hammered painfully against his ribs, each breath coming shorter than the last, air thickening to syrup in his lungs. The cold sweat that had been threatening during the meeting now broke out across his forehead and down his back, making his shirt cling sticky to his skin.

He could still feel the imprint of Jun Wu's hand on his back and began to feel ill when he couldn't rub its phantom away with his own palm: the casual assertion of power, the assumption of permission. Jun Wu had touched him because he could, because Xie Lian's confines (the ones he kept himself in) didn't matter to Jun Wu. The same way Xie Lian's career hadn't mattered to those who had destroyed it in Wuhan. It made him feel oddly hollowed out, as if something had been taken from him: the right to control and dictate himself, his life, physically and otherwise.

Everything he'd built over the past two years—this fragile new existence—balanced on the edge of a knife. After Wuhan, after the accusations and the disgrace, after watching his parents' lives destroyed alongside his own, he'd finally found something resembling stability: a purpose, however humble. People who valued him, even if they didn't know who he had once been. And San Lang...

His vision tunneled from there; the distant sound of the hospital—a closing door, the hum of the ventilation system—receded, replaced by the rushing of blood in his ears.

It was happening again. Why was it happening again? Once more, he was caught in the gears of something larger than himself, his fate in the hands of those bigger than him. Once more, he would be used, manipulated, and ultimately discarded when found to be no longer useful.

He slid down the wall until he was crouching, head bowed between his knees as he tried to—with all the effort he could—suck air into lungs that had forgotten their purpose. His trembling hands gripped his knees, knuckles bone-blanched with the effort of holding himself together.

What would he tell San Lang? Could he tell San Lang? The thought of explaining made his throat close up—how could he put into words what had happened when nothing had really "happened" at all? Just a hand where it shouldn't be, small enough to dismiss, easy enough for others to minimize.

"You're overreacting."

"That's just how he is with everyone."

"Are you sure you didn't misinterpret his intentions?"

He'd be labeled sensitive, dramatic, looking for problems where none existed. Or worse—opportunistic, vindictive, trying to deflect from his own questionable past by making accusations against the hospital director. He'd heard it all before in Wuhan when he tried to speak up. The subtle art of making the victim

doubt themselves, question their own reality, until they gave up.

And if he refused Jun Wu, what then? Would he lose even this meager life he'd carved out from the wreckage of his old one?

He had to move. Had to get away from this hallway, away from Jun Wu's office, before someone found him like this. He pushed himself upright, one palm flat against the wall for balance as the corridor continued to sway like the deck of a ship.

Breathe. Just breathe. One step at a time.

He fumbled for his phone with fingers that felt disconnected from his body, the screen a blur through eyes that struggled to focus. It took three attempts to unlock it, and another moment to find San Lang's contact.

Meeting over. Outside main entrance.

The act of sending that message required more concentration than brain surgery did. He pocketed the phone, the USB drive a malignant cargo beside it, and forced himself to walk—one mechanical step after another—toward the stairwell. The elevator, too, felt confining.

By the time he reached the ground floor, his breathing had steadied somewhat, though his heart still raced. The night guard barely glanced up as he passed.

The cool evening air hit his face like a slap, shocking and grounding both. He found a bench near the entrance and slumped, fawn legs too unsteady to support him any longer. The USB drive pressed sharp against his thigh through his pocket.

What was he going to do? He couldn't participate in whatever scheme Director Jun was running—his ethics wouldn't allow it. But refusing meant risking not only his own position but potentially Hua Cheng's as well. And if the truth about Wuhan became public knowledge here...

Then he was dizzy again, spinning like a budoweng doll. He

gripped the edge of the bench and felt himself brought back somewhat by its rough graining.

He'd spent two years rebuilding his life from the ashes of Wuhan, careful and quiet, head down, never asking for more than he deserved. And now, this. The familiarity of it stung most—being cornered, having his past weaponized against him—a manufactured past, at that.

The USB drive in his pocket felt radioactive, its contents a contagion he wanted no part of. Yet he couldn't simply throw it away. Evidence, his clinical mind whispered. Keep it safe.

"Gege?"

Xie Lian's head snapped up. Hua Cheng stood there in his red scrubs, scanning over Xie Lian with a worried look. “What happened?” he asked.

"Nothing," Xie Lian said automatically, feeling clumsy in his lie and more dizzy for the imaginary spotlight it put on him. "The meeting just ran long."

"Gege is a terrible liar."

Hua Cheng crouched, bringing their faces level and his hands to rest on Xie Lian's knees.

Xie Lian tensed at first, but reminded himself this was San Lang. As Hua Cheng's thumbs moved gently across his skin, he found comfort in knowing he had complete control. San Lang would stop immediately if asked to, would adjust his touch as needed.

"Just..." Xie Lian couldn't drag San Lang into this mess. Jun Wu had already implied a threat against him; involving Hua Cheng directly would only make things worse. Besides, this was Xie Lian's problem to solve—his past, his burden. San Lang had his own career to consider, his own reputation at Tonglu. "Administrative details, mostly. Budget discussions."

"That doesn't explain why you looked like you'd seen a ghost

when I found you."

"I was just... overwhelmed," Xie Lian said, focusing intently on his hands folded neat and tidy in his lap. "Being in Director Jun's office, discussing finances—it brought back some difficult memories. A momentary panic, nothing more."

It wasn't entirely a lie. The meeting *had* triggered memories of his past, of feeling helpless and cornered, but of course not the whole truth.

Hua Cheng glanced over his shoulder toward the sound of a passing car, then back to Xie Lian. "Gege is still a terrible liar."

"I'm not—"

"It's okay, gege," Hua Cheng said. "I won't push. When you're ready to tell me, I'll be here."

Warm, bubbly relief—Xie Lian felt it anew, knowing he had space to keep his secrets even if Hua Cheng acknowledged their existence; that he would never open the door on that stuffy closet unless Xie Lian wanted it.

A few feet away, a moth fluttered against one of the outdoor lamps—persistent, determined, drawn to a light that could never sustain it.

Xie Lian watched its futile bouncing. "Do you ever wonder why moths fly toward lights even though it might kill them?"

Hua Cheng followed his eyes to the lamp. "They mistake artificial light for the moon or stars—navigation points they evolved to use. What once guided them safely now leads them astray."

"How sad," Xie Lian murmured.

"I think it's beautiful," Hua Cheng countered. "To be so driven by your nature that even death seems inconsequential compared to following your purpose."

Xie Lian looked at him. "I wouldn't have taken you for a poetic type, San Lang."

Hua Cheng's lips curved into a small, cheeky smile. "There are many things gege doesn't yet know about me."

"I'd like to learn them," Xie Lian said without thinking, then glowed red at his own forwardness.

"And I'd like to teach you."

They sat quiet for a while, Hua Cheng's hands still resting on Xie Lian's knees. The hospital entrance lights cast long, thin shadows across the courtyard, punctuated by the occasional headlights and low rumbling of cars swishing out of the staff parking garage.

Finally, Xie Lian sighed and straightened his shoulders. "I should get home. It's getting late."

Hua Cheng nodded, rising to his feet and offering his hand. Xie Lian took it, allowing himself to be pulled upright, surprised at how steady he felt now compared to the trembling wreck he'd been just thirty minutes earlier.

They began walking toward the parking garage, which was nearly empty save whatever cars belonged to the night shift staff, scattered across a concrete grey expanse. The night was cool but not uncomfortable, the sky clear enough to reveal a few stubborn stars fighting through the city's light pollution.

Once at the car, Hua Cheng asked, voice brassy in that way it sometimes got, and Xie Lian didn't need to look over to tell he was smiling, "Would gege like me to stay with him again tonight? You seemed to sleep well yesterday. I wouldn't want you to be tired tomorrow."

Heat crept up Xie Lian's neck. "I—I slept fine, yes."

"Just fine?" Hua Cheng's eye crinkled fondly at the corner. "Did gege not like using my chest as his pillow?"

"I did not—" Xie Lian began, mortified with memory—waking briefly in the night to find himself curled against San Lang, one arm thrown across his chest, head tucked beneath his chin. "Did I really...?"

"You did," Hua Cheng's smile widened. "And you were quite insistent about it. Every time I tried to move, you made this disgruntled noise and held on tighter."

"Oh god," Xie Lian covered his face with his hands. "I'm so sorry."

"Don't be," Hua Cheng gently pulled Xie Lian's hands away from his face. "I found it endearing."

Their eyes met, and something fond and aglow unfurled in Xie Lian's chest, a tentative bloom pushing through soil that had long lain fallow.

"Besides," Hua Cheng continued, fingers still loosely circled around Xie Lian's wrists, "I think I sleep better with gege nearby. No nightmares."

"You have nightmares?"

Hua Cheng's thumb traced small circles on the inside of Xie Lian's wrist. "Everyone does, gege."

Xie Lian considered this; the thought of returning to his apartment alone was a sort of unsettling in itself. Would Jun Wu's shadow follow him home? Would the walls of his tiny apartment close in around him as he replayed the meeting over and over in his mind? Jun Wu's hand on his thigh, on his back—he felt them again like oil slicks on his skin and shivered.

But with San Lang there... the apartment wouldn't feel so empty.

"So," Hua Cheng prompted gently, "would gege like me to stay with him?"

Xie Lian nodded, swallowing his pride. "Yes. If you don't mind."

Hua Cheng shone splendid with warmth. "I don't mind at all."

Suddenly realizing, Xie Lian's shoulders fell with his sigh. "I'll have to inflate my air mattress again."

"I imagine so," Hua Cheng agreed. "Unless it's developed self-healing properties since this morning."

Xie Lian gave a small laugh. "That would be convenient. I think I have more tape, though I'm not sure it'll hold through the night. The floor isn't too bad though."

"Or," Hua Cheng suggested casually, "gege could stay at my place tonight."

Xie Lian's head snapped up, keys dangling forgotten from his fingers. "Your apartment?"

"It has the advantage of an actual bed," Hua Cheng said. "Two, in fact. And heating that works. And windows that don't rattle with every breeze."

"I couldn't possibly—" Xie Lian began, shaking his head. "That's too much trouble. I'll be fine with the air mattress, or even the floor if necessary. I've slept on worse, and—"

"Gege, you deserve a proper rest. And I would also rest easier knowing you're comfortable and taken care of."

The offer was tempting—more than tempting. The thought of a real bed, proper heating, a space that wasn't permeated with a vague sense of failure and making-do. Then there was San Lang… But accepting felt like another admission of weakness, another way he was failing to manage on his own. And the imposition on San Lang? His apartment was his private space, and Xie Lian had already asked so much of him lately.

"I don't want to be a bother…"

"You could never be a bother to me," Hua Cheng replied, his voice so firm that Xie Lian looked up in surprise. "Never."

"If you're sure..."

"I'm sure."

Xie Lian slid into the driver's seat, mind already racing ahead to what he should pack. Clean scrubs for tomorrow, toiletries, perhaps his book (a xianxia novel about a martial god who falls in love with a ghost king. The last one he'd read had been about a demonic cultivator).

As they pulled out of the parking lot, Xie Lian found himself acutely aware of San Lang's presence beside him—the blend of smells that composed him a distinction without having to be seen: antiseptic surgical soap layered with his cologne, something warm and woody with hints of spice that Xie Lian could never quite identify (once, he'd guessed sandalwood, and San Lang had smiled, saying "There's that, yes, but something else too").

"San Lang…"

"Mm?"

"Thank you."

"For what?"

"For making me feel like I'm not a burden, even when I'm being one."

"Gege is many things, but a burden is not one of them."

The city lights smeared across the windshield as they drove, red and amber streaks against the darkness. Rain had begun to fall (as it did often these nights)—just a light drizzle that beaded on the glass before the wipers swept it away in rhythmic arcs. The radio played softly in the background—some late-night classical program that neither of them had consciously chosen but seemed to fit the moment. Nocturnes.

"I've never seen the inside of your apartment," Xie Lian realized aloud. "What's it like?"

"Uninteresting. Just a place to sleep."

"I doubt that," Xie Lian said, smiling slightly. "I'm sure it's as particular as you are."

"Particular?" Hua Cheng's mouth quirked. "Is that how gege sees me?"

"Precise, then," Xie Lian amended. "Intentional."

They stopped at a red light and its crimson washed them both. In the strange illumination, Hua Cheng's single eye reflected back the city's lights like a dark mirror.

"Your car handles well in the rain," Hua Cheng observed, breaking the quiet.

"It's seen worse weather than this. What it lacks in aesthetics, it makes up for in reliability."

"Reliable like its owner."

Xie Lian was glad for the red light to hide in, his cheeks bursting with rose.

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Hua Cheng's apartment building stood tall against the night sky, its modern glass reflecting the city lights like a mirror to the stars themselves. Xie Lian pulled into the visitor parking area, noting with mild embarrassment how his dented sedan looked among the sleek vehicles that surrounded it—a peasant at court.

"This way," Hua Cheng said, leading Xie Lian through the automatic doors that slid open with a soft, pneumatic hiss.

The lobby was pristine: marble floors gleaming under recessed lighting, a security desk staffed by a uniformed attendant

who nodded at Hua Cheng, and potted plants that looked too perfect to be real. Xie Lian tried not to stare, but he couldn't help feeling out of place the way a stain does on expensive fabric.

"Good evening," the security guard greeted. "Will your guest need temporary access?"

"Yes," Hua Cheng replied. "My partner will be staying with me."

Xie Lian almost stumbled at the word—partner—but managed to keep himself upright while Hua Cheng completed the necessary paperwork. The term felt both foreign and right.

They took the elevator to the twelfth floor, standing shoulder to shoulder. Xie Lian's mind raced with the usual concerns of visiting someone's home for the first time—what to compliment, where to sit, whether to remove his shoes (yes, of course he should)—compounded by the knowledge that this was *San Lang's* home.

The elevator doors opened onto a hallway carpeted in deep blue, walls painted a soft cream that made the space feel much wider than it was. Hua Cheng led him to apartment 1204, keys jingling in hand.

"It's nothing special," he said as he unlocked the door. "Just somewhere to sleep between shifts."

The door swung open, and Hua Cheng stepped aside to let Xie Lian enter first. Whatever modest expectations Hua Cheng had tried to set were immediately shattered. The apartment wasn't just "somewhere to sleep"—it was a carefully curated space that reflected its owner in a hundred subtle ways.

The main room was spacious and open-concept, with floor-to-ceiling windows along one wall offering a panoramic view of the city. Sleek, modern furniture in deep black and rich reds was arranged around a glass coffee table with a polished maple frame. A sophisticated entertainment system occupied one wall, while floating black shelves held an assortment of books and small artifacts—seashells, carved wooden figures, what looked like

military challenge coins.

"San Lang," Xie Lian breathed, taking it all in. "This is... beautiful."

Hua Cheng closed the door behind them. "It's functional."

"It's more than that," Xie Lian insisted, kicking off his shoes before moving further into the apartment. His eyes caught on a framed painting above the couch—a traditional ink landscape of mountains shrouded in mist. "Is this original or reprint?"

"Original," Hua Cheng admitted. "I collect things when I get bored. Does gege like it?"

“It’s beautiful,” Xie Lian said, and then he was off again, finding something new. There were other artistic touches throughout the space: a ceramic vase holding a single perfect orchid on the dining table, a small bronze sculpture that resembled ocean waves frozen mid-curl, and what appeared to be a real scimitar from who knew where.

The kitchen continued the modern aesthetic with polished black granite counter tops that absorbed light, contrasted against maple cabinetry stained a rich, warm red. Stainless steel appliances gleamed barely used. A sleek wine rack held several bottles, their labels turned out for display like soldiers at attention, the reds among them matching the dominant palette of the apartment.

"Make yourself comfortable," Hua Cheng said, setting his keys in a small dish by the door. "Would you like something to drink? Water, tea? I have wine if you prefer."

"Tea would be nice," Xie Lian replied, still taking in his surroundings.

He noticed that despite the apartment's obvious luxury, it felt somewhat impersonal, like a showroom designed to impress rather than a lived-in home. There were no family photos, no magnets on the refrigerator, no mail scattered on counter tops—none of the ordinary detritus of daily life. It was pristine, perfect, and strangely

lonely.

"I'll start the kettle," Hua Cheng said, moving into the kitchen. "Feel free to look around."

Permission granted, Xie Lian explored away. A hallway led to what he presumed were the bedrooms and bathroom. He resisted the urge to peek, not wanting to intrude too far into San Lang's privacy without him present. Instead, he returned to the bookshelves, examining the titles: medical textbooks sat alongside military history, philosophy, and—to his surprise—several volumes of poetry.

"You read Li Bai?" Xie Lian asked, pulling out a well-worn collection.

"And Du Fu," Hua Cheng replied from the kitchen. "Though I prefer Li Bai's imagery."

Xie Lian smiled at this unexpected revelation. "I wouldn't have guessed."

"There are many things about me gege wouldn't guess," Hua Cheng teased as he carried two steaming mugs to the coffee table. "Please, sit."

Xie Lian settled onto the couch, swallowed by its cushions. Hua Cheng sat beside him and their thighs bumped. The tea was served in plain white ceramic—no chipped mugs here.

"Is it strange," Xie Lian asked, rubbing the warm cup between his palms, "coming home to such emptiness after the mess of a hospital?"

Hua Cheng considered this. "The hospital demands so much. Here, I can exist without it."

"It suits you," Xie Lian said, though he couldn't help but feel that something was missing from the space. It was beautiful, certainly, but lacked the warmth that characterized San Lang himself.

"Would gege like a tour?" Hua Cheng offered. "It's not large, but there's more than just this room."

"I'd like that."

Hua Cheng set down his tea and stood, extending his hand. Xie Lian took it, allowing himself to be guided down the hallway.

"Bathroom," Hua Cheng indicated with a nod toward the first door on the left. "Guest bedroom," he said, opening the door to a space furnished with a queen-sized bed, dresser, and nightstand—all matching in sleek black. Like the rest of the apartment, it was immaculate, with bedding in shades of charcoal and crimson, the pillowcases embroidered with a subtle pattern that Xie Lian couldn't quite make out in the dim light.

"And this," Hua Cheng said, hesitating slightly before opening the last door, "is my room."

Xie Lian was struck by how different this space felt from the rest of the apartment. While still neat, this room showed signs of being inhabited. A book lay open on the nightstand, a sweatshirt draped over a reading chair in the corner, and a wall was dedicated to what appeared to be San Lang's private collection—artwork more vibrant and emotional than that in the main room.

The bed was large—king-sized, Xie Lian thought it fitting—with a heavy wooden frame and (not shockingly) deep red bedding that stood in stark contrast to the blues and blacks throughout the rest of the apartment. There was a lamp on the nightstand and a small bottle of what must have been eye drops.

"It's not usually this messy," Hua Cheng said, picking up the sweatshirt and throwing it in the direction of the closet without checking where it landed. "I was in a hurry this morning."

"It's perfect," Xie Lian said, and meant it. This room felt more like San Lang—the San Lang he was coming to know.

He moved toward the art wall, drawn to a particular piece—a watercolor of chrysanthemums that mirrored the tattoos on Hua

Cheng's arm.

"Did you paint this?" Xie Lian asked.

Hua Cheng came to stand beside him. "It's a hobby I picked up during rehabilitation."

"After your injury?" Xie Lian guessed.

"The doctor suggested it might help with depth perception adjustments, and I enjoyed it more than I expected."

"You're talented, San Lang," Xie Lian said, genuinely impressed. "These are beautiful."

"They're amateur efforts."

"Don't dismiss your gifts," Xie Lian chided. "No one would guess the fearsome Dr. Hua is also an artist."

"That's the point. Some things I keep for myself alone." He looked over. "And now for you, gege."

Following the apartment tour, they returned to the living room to finish their tea. Xie Lian stood by the floor-to-ceiling windows, watching the city lights twinkle.

"Are you hungry, gege?" Hua Cheng collected their empty mugs.

"A little," Xie Lian admitted, turning away from the view. "But please don't trouble yourself. We could order something. Let me pay for once."

"No need," Hua Cheng replied, already moving toward the kitchen. "I can make us something simple."

Xie Lian followed him, watching as Hua Cheng opened the refrigerator and began pulling out ingredients—salmon fillets (fresh, never frozen), herbs, lemons, and an assortment of vegetables.

"Let me help," Xie Lian offered, already rolling up his sleeves. "I can't just stand here while you do all the work."

Hua Cheng arched an amused brow but nodded. "Alright. Would you mind washing and chopping these vegetables?"

"Of course!" Xie Lian replied with enthusiasm that far outstripped his actual culinary abilities. He took the vegetables to the sink, washing them thoroughly before bringing them to the cutting board Hua Cheng had set out.

His first attempts at chopping were—best put—awful. Carrots emerged in different sizes, some paper-thin, others chunky enough to be choking hazards.

"Like this?" he asked, presenting his work with an uncertain smile.

Hua Cheng glanced over, his face going soft at the cutting board slaughter. "Almost, gege. Here, let me show you."

He moved behind Xie Lian, reaching around to guide his hands. "Hold the knife like this," he murmured close to Xie Lian's ear, adjusting his grip. "And keep your fingers curled under when holding the vegetable. Safety first."

The warmth of Hua Cheng's chest against his back made it difficult for Xie Lian to focus on the lesson. "I think I'm reinventing the concept of julienne," he commented and Hua Cheng laughed, wrapping his arms around Xie Lian's waist and pulling him close. His lips found the crown of Xie Lian's head, pressing a soft kiss there before moving to his temple.

"San Lang," Xie Lian giggled, squirming as Hua Cheng's breath prickled his ear. "Stop, that tickles!"

Hua Cheng held fast, peppering more kisses along Xie Lian's temples and down to a sensitive spot just behind his ear. "Does it?" he murmured, clearly delighted by this discovery. "Here too?"

Xie Lian's breath caught, nails digging into Hua Cheng's forearm.

Hua Cheng pulled back. "Sorry, gege," he murmured. "Too much?"

"N-no, it's—" Xie Lian stammered, unable to form a coherent thought with his pulse racing so wildly. "I just—I'm not—"

"It's okay," Hua Cheng assured him, keeping his arms around Xie Lian's waist but moving his face away to give him space.

Xie Lian relaxed, grateful. "I liked it," he admitted quietly. "It was just... new."

Hua Cheng pressed one more soft kiss to the top of Xie Lian's head before reluctantly releasing him. "The salmon calls," he said, and it was, the heating oil in the pan hissing and popping.

They talked easily about nothing important—hospital gossip, a patient Hua Cheng had treated that day, the book Xie Lian was reading (the one about the ghost king). It felt comfortable in a way

Xie Lian hadn’t found in the company of Feng Xin or Mu Qing when they lived together upon first moving to America—syrupy and kettle-warm behind his eyes.

Soon, Hua Cheng was placing two beautifully arranged plates on the dining table: seared salmon with a pan sauce accompanied by roasted vegetables (including Xie Lian's uniquely cut carrots) and a small portion of wild rice.

"This looks amazing," Xie Lian said, sitting down across from Hua Cheng. "I didn't help much at all."

"You did, look at these artistic carrots," Hua Cheng insisted, his voice warm like cedar forests in summer—rich and deep, with an earthy resonance.

"That doesn't make any sense," Xie Lian laughed.

"It makes perfect sense to me.”

The salmon was perfectly cooked, of course it was—crisp on the outside, tender within. The sauce was light but flavorful, with hints of lemon and herbs that Xie Lian couldn't name but thoroughly enjoyed.

"Where did you learn to cook like this?" he asked between bites.

Hua Cheng took a sip of water before answering. "Here and there. I have a lot of free time on my hands.”

"Really?" Xie Lian looked surprised. "I would have thought a trauma surgeon barely had time to sleep, let alone develop hobbies."

"I don't socialize much," Hua Cheng said with a small shrug. "Work, home, repeat. It leaves more hours than you might expect."

Xie Lian considered this, twirling his fork absently. "So you spend all your free time alone? No... friends or..." he hesitated, suddenly feeling shy, "...partners?"

"Are you asking about my past relationships, gege?"

"I'm just curious," Xie Lian said quickly, looking down at his plate. "You don't have to answer if it's too personal."

"I don't mind," Hua Cheng replied after a moment. "There's not much to tell. I've dated occasionally but nothing that lasted. The military and then medical training don't leave much room for meaningful connections. What about you, gege?"

Xie Lian felt his face heat up. "Oh, I... well, I was always focused on my studies and then my career. In China, I barely had time to sleep, let alone date. And after coming here..." he trailed off with a small shrug. "It just never happened."

"I see," Hua Cheng said softly.

"It doesn't bother me," Xie Lian added quickly. "It just wasn't a priority."

"Things happen when they're meant to," Hua Cheng said, his gaze thoughtful. "Or when the right person comes along. But enough about that. Tell me about this book you're reading. The one with the ghost king?"

Xie Lian brightened. "It's a cultivation novel—historical fantasy. There's this fallen god who's trying to rebuild his life after being cast out of heaven three times, and he meets this powerful ghost king who's been watching over him for centuries. It's romantic but also has lots of action and magic."

"Sounds intriguing," Hua Cheng said, genuinely interested. "You enjoy fantasy stories?"

"I do," Xie Lian admitted. "They're a nice escape. Though sometimes I wonder what it would be like to be that god—to fall so far and still find someone who loves you unconditionally through it all."

Hua Cheng looked at him like Xie Lian were a small light cupped in his palms. "I think anyone would be lucky to be loved

like that."

"Yes," Xie Lian agreed quietly. “I’d think so.”

When they were done with their meal, they cleared the table together, moving around each other easily in the kitchen. Hua Cheng insisted on handling the dishes, so Xie Lian dried them as they were washed, moving them down to their drawer or cabinet like a conveyor belt.

"I was thinking," Hua Cheng said suddenly, turning the water warmer, "about your mattress.”

Xie Lian groaned. "Please don't remind me."

"What if I bought you a new one?"

"San Lang, no," Xie Lian shook his head firmly. "That's too much."

"Is it? You need to sleep, gege. Proper sleep, not whatever passes for rest on that slowly deflating death trap."

"Death trap! It's not that bad."

"It absolutely is. I believe it was actively trying to consume us last night."

This sent Xie Lian into a fit of giggles. "Like some kind of rubber monster from a B-movie?"

"Exactly," Hua Cheng's eye twinkled. "The Blob, but make it inflatable."

"The Deflatable Blob," Xie Lian suggested, dissolving into laughter again.

"Coming to eat unsuspecting surgeons everywhere," Hua Cheng added, also laughing.

Once the last fork was set away, Xie Lian tried to stifle a

yawn with his hand.

"Tired?" Hua Cheng asked.

"A little," Xie Lian admitted, blinking slowly. "It's been a long day. Would…"

He hesitated, suddenly aware of how domestic this all felt—dinner, cleaning up together. It was lovely territory (different, yes), but he found himself feeling momentarily shy. What had changed, he wondered, and what hadn't; how strange to think that only days ago they had been merely colleagues who carpooled, and now they were here, in this apartment with its view of the city, and yet nothing felt foreign or new. He realized—watching San Lang fold a dish towel—that perhaps they had been living in a state of anticipation all these months; every shared lunch, every late drive home, every hot pot evening, every conversation had been drawing an invisible map to this exact moment. The only difference now was permission—permission to inhabit each other's spaces without pretense. His confession had only unlocked a door that had always been there, waiting.

"Would it be alright if I could I use your bathroom? To get ready for bed, I mean."

The request felt oddly intimate, though he couldn't quite explain why, this simple question that people must ask their hosts all the time.

Hua Cheng's expression was warm and open. "Of course," he agreed. "The guest bathroom has fresh towels and spare toiletries if you need them. I'll show you where everything is."

The guest bathroom was as luxurious as the rest of the apartment—marble counter tops, a glass-enclosed shower with multiple heads, fluffy towels (rolled like at hotels, not folded). Hua Cheng pointed out the toiletries—all high-end brands—and demonstrated how to adjust the shower temperature ("It can be temperamental," he warned, yet was nothing but obediently hot and cold.)

"Take all the time you need," Hua Cheng said, leaning against the doorframe, arms folded. "I'll be in the living room when you're finished." He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to the crown of Xie Lian's head. "Make yourself at home, gege," he murmured, before turning and walking away.

Xie Lian closed the door and slumped against it for a moment, his heart fluttering in his chest. He caught his reflection in the mirror—flushed cheeks and bright eyes staring back at him. There was something about being in San Lang's space, using his things…

The shower was indeed luxurious, with water pressure that made Xie Lian's own apartment's shower seem like a leaking faucet by comparison. He washed quickly but thoroughly, using the expensive-looking shampoo that smelled like San Lang himself. The towels were soft against his skin, and as he dried himself, he marveled at how different their lives were in material terms. Yet somehow, they had found their way to each other. He changed into his pajamas, and after brushing his teeth with the new toothbrush Hua Cheng had provided (tucking it in the holder next to the red toothbrush), gathered his courage and opened the bathroom door.

Hua Cheng was sitting on the couch, reading something on his tablet. He looked up when Xie Lian entered, and his eye softened at the sight, head tilting.

"Feel better?" he asked, setting the tablet aside.

"Much," Xie Lian nodded. "Your shower is amazing."

"One of the reasons I chose this apartment," Hua Cheng admitted. He stood up, stretching his arms above head. "Would you like me to show you to the guest room? Or... If you prefer, you could stay in my room. With me."

"I—" Xie Lian began, then stopped, his throat suddenly dry. "That is—"

"The guest room is perfectly comfortable," Hua Cheng added, misinterpreting Xie Lian's stammering as reluctance. "I didn't mean

to presume—"

"No!" Xie Lian said, a bit too loudly, and winced. He took a deep breath. "I mean, I would... I would like to stay with you. If that's really okay."

"More than okay, gege." Hua Cheng's eye fixed on Xie Lian's damp hair. "Would you like me to braid your hair again before you sleep?"

Xie Lian's hand went to his hair, still loose around his shoulders. "If you don't mind?"

"I wouldn't have offered if I minded."

They settled on the couch, Xie Lian sitting cross-legged with his back to Hua Cheng, who knelt behind him. The gentle tug as San Lang's fingers worked through his hair sent pleasant shivers down Xie Lian's spine.

"Your hair is like silk," Hua Cheng murmured, separating it into sections.

"You say that about all my features," Xie Lian said. "My hair is like silk, my hands are elegant, my smile is perfect."

"Because they are," Hua Cheng replied simply. "Would gege prefer I lie?"

"No," Xie Lian admitted with a small, self-indulging smile. "I just wonder sometimes if you see me through rose-tinted glasses."

"I see you exactly as you are. Every perfection, every flaw," Hua Cheng tied off the plaiting with a black elastic, "and I find all of it magnificent."

"Thank you, San Lang."

"My pleasure, gege. Time for bed?"

Xie Lian nodded, unable to suppress a small, excited smile

that made him years younger.

"Let me just—" Hua Cheng gestured toward the bathroom. "I need a quick shower. Make yourself comfortable in the bedroom."

"I'll find it," Xie Lian assured him, already bouncing slightly on his toes.

They parted ways, and Xie Lian padded down the hallway, fingers trailing along the wall as he went. He approached the bed tentatively, pressing his palm against the mattress. It gave just the right amount under pressure. Without thinking, Xie Lian launched himself forward, flopping onto the bed with his arms outstretched. He bounced once, twice, a childlike giggle escaping him as he starfished across its silky stretch.

"This is amazing," he whispered to no one, rolling from side to side, delighted. He caught himself mid-roll, suddenly self-conscious despite being alone. What if San Lang came in and saw him acting so silly? But the thought only made him giggle again.

He heard the shower start in the bathroom and felt a flutter of nervous excitement. There was something so personal about waiting for San Lang while he showered just a wall away, both thrilling and terrifying in equal measure.

Xie Lian sat up and perched on the bed's edge, toes barely grazing the floor, so he swung his feet a little, heels thumping gently against the bed frame. Then, making a decision, he slipped under the covers, rolling himself in their softness and crispness; they felt cool and smooth against his skin, the duvet weighty and comfortable.

He heard the shower turn off, followed by the quiet sounds of feet padding back and forth in the bathroom.

Wafts of steam preceded Hua Cheng, stepping into the bedroom wearing only pajama pants slung low on his hips (again) and toweling his hair dry. The chrysanthemum tattoos were—as Xie Lian was beginning to learn—always more beautiful under the warm yellow of night time lamps.

"One moment, gege," Hua Cheng said, holding up a finger. "I forgot something."

He disappeared from the room, and a minute later, returned with a glass of water to place on the nightstand beside Xie Lian.

"In case you get thirsty in the night," he explained. Then he was gone again, returning this time with a neatly folded extra blanket, which he laid at the foot of the bed. "And in case you get cold."

"San Lang," Xie Lian felt puddly with the thoughtfulness. "You don't need to fuss over me."

"I'm not fussing," Hua Cheng replied. "I'm being a considerate host."

"Is that what you are?" Xie Lian teased. "My host?"

"I am whatever gege wants me to be."

Xie Lian felt warmth climb his neck and found himself momentarily tongue-tied. What did he want Hua Cheng to be? Boyfriend seemed too adolescent a term, partner too clinical. Lover was too forward given they'd shared nothing more intimate than a few kisses. Whatever term applied, Xie Lian knew—resolutely—that he wanted this: San Lang, this apartment with its too-fancy shower, the water glass, the extra blanket, all of it.

"Right now," Xie Lian put a finger to his lips, "I just want you to come to bed," then patted the space beside him.

Hua Cheng hung his towel on a hook off the bathroom door, then slid under the covers, mattress dipping beneath his weight. Xie Lian felt a thrill at the way their bodies naturally gravitated toward each other in the concavity.

Xie Lian lay on his back, staring up at the ceiling. "This is nice," he said, then immediately cringed at how bland the comment was. "I mean—"

"It is nice," Hua Cheng agreed, turning on his side to face him.

Xie Lian shifted to mirror him, and they lay facing each other, close enough that he could feel Hua Cheng's breath on his face. In the soft lamplight, Hua Cheng's eyepatch was a shadow against his skin, his eye reflecting gold like a coin at the bottom of a fountain.

Without thinking, Xie Lian reached up to touch it, his fingers hovering just above the edge. "Does it hurt? To keep it on all the time?"

"Sometimes," Hua Cheng admitted. "After long days."

"You could take it off if you wanted to."

Hua Cheng was quiet for a moment. “It’s ugly…”

"My San Lang could never be ugly," Xie Lian said firmly, then flustered upon realizing what he’d said. "I mean—not that you're mine, or that I'm claiming—"

Hua Cheng's face broke into a radiant smile. In one fluid motion, he caught Xie Lian around the waist and rolled them over, pulling Xie Lian on top of him. Xie Lian squeaked, finding himself straddling Hua Cheng with hands braced against his bare chest.

"Say that again," Hua Cheng urged.

"Which part?" Xie Lian asked meekly.

"The part where I'm yours."

Xie Lian's blushed so hard he might have matched Hua Cheng’s motif red, but he didn't look away. "My San Lang," he repeated softly, but more certainly.

"I like the sound of that." Hua Cheng reached up to tuck a strand of hair behind Xie Lian's ear. Then, more seriously, he slipped his fingers beneath the elastic band of his eyepatch and

pulled it away, letting the scarring breathe.

It wasn't grotesque. Or rather, it was, but not in the way Hua Cheng imagined it to be, but grotesque in the sense that all wounds are: not because of how they look, rather how they insist you remember the way they came to be. The socket had healed, the skin where his eye had once been sunken and taut, gathered into faint ridges like cloth pulled too tightly over the corner of a shallow basin. The scarring was pale and fine at first, like opalescent water snakes wriggling towards their pond—then denser as it spread outward, rougher, where tissue had been burned or carved and stitched back.

"It doesn't hurt anymore," Hua Cheng misinterpreted Xie Lian's silence. "The nerve damage is extensive."

"May I?" Xie Lian asked, lifting his hand.

At Hua Cheng's nod, he gently traced the edge of the scarring with his fingertips.

"Thank you," Xie Lian said quietly.

Hua Cheng looked confused. "For what?"

"For trusting me enough to show me this."

Hua Cheng caught Xie Lian's hand and pressed a kiss to his palm. "I would trust you with anything, gege."

Xie Lian shifted his weight, settling more comfortably how he sat, his knees on either side of Hua Cheng's torso. The position should have made him self-conscious, but there was something about San Lang that made him bold at times. He lowered himself until their foreheads touched, then tucked his face into the crook of Hua Cheng's neck, breathing in the cleanness of his skin with a sigh. His fingers slid up to thread through Hua Cheng's hair, gently combing through the silk.

They stayed like that, breathing each other's air, and slowly, Hua Cheng's hands moved to Xie Lian's waist.

"San Lang," Xie Lian whispered. "I..."

Hua Cheng pulled him into a kiss. Xie Lian's hand slid from Hua Cheng's hair to his neck and felt the pulse thrumming beneath his fingers, racing just as fast as his own.

Hua Cheng's lips were soft; the gentle scrape of teeth against his bottom lip made Xie Lian gasp, and Hua Cheng took the opportunity to slip his tongue in, sending a shiver down Xie Lian's spine—bubbly, carbonated pleasure accompanied by a small, involuntary sound from the back of his throat.

Hua Cheng's hands stayed at Xie Lian's waist, neither pulling him closer nor pushing him away, letting Xie Lian set the pace. Feeling emboldened, Xie Lian nibbled at Hua Cheng’s bottom lip, trying to mimic what had felt so good moments before, and was rewarded with a low groan that vibrated through Hua Cheng's chest and into his own. Hua Cheng's hands finally moved, sliding up Xie Lian's back under his pajama shirt, calloused fingertips leaving trails of goosebumps in their wake.

The kiss grew messier, frenzied, salty when Hua Cheng sucked at Xie Lian's tongue, the click of teeth when they both tried to adjust at the same moment. There was something thrilling about the imperfection of it, the unmistakable evidence that this was real and not some polished fantasy. Xie Lian felt dizzy with it all.

When they finally broke apart, a thin strand of saliva briefly connected their lips before breaking. Both were breathing heavily, pupils dilated, lips red and slightly puffy.

"Too much?" Hua Cheng asked, his hands stilling on Xie Lian's back.

"No," Xie Lian shook his head, a strand of hair falling loosely around his flushed face. "Not too much. Just right."

"Good," Hua Cheng breathed. "I don't want to rush you."

"You aren't," Xie Lian assured him, shifting to lie beside Hua Cheng rather than on top of him. "I want this. I want..."

He trailed off, unable to articulate. It was all so new, so overwhelming—what *was* it that he wanted? His entire life had back-seated dating (how could he even consider physical desires?) as distractions to overcome, indulgences that would only lead him astray from his purpose. Even now, some habits remained embedded beneath the skin; the shame that accompanied thoughts of physical pleasure was not so easily discarded. How utterly illiterate he was in some manners of adult life. What must San Lang think of him?

And yet Hua Cheng seemed to understand without Xie Lian having to explain. He turned to face him and pressed a gentle kiss to Xie Lian's forehead.

"We have time," he said. "All the time we need."

Xie Lian nodded; it was as if a colorless wind had swept him clean of unease from the inside—even his bones lit up. Perhaps it was just another aspect of himself that San Lang would accept, as he had accepted everything else.

Without a word, they laid there, side by side. The city lights filtered through the curtains, painting stripes of blue and gold across the ceiling that shifted with each passing car below. A soft mechanical hum from the building's air system provided a gentle white noise backdrop, occasionally punctuated by the faint click of the radiator expanding as it warmed. The bedside clock's red numbers glowed 11:47. The glass panes cooled from the night air, causing condensation to form at their edges—little beads of water that caught the ambient light and gleamed like miniature stars. The distant wail of an ambulance rose and fell.

"San Lang," Xie Lian said eventually, his voice drowsy. "Tell me something."

"What would you like to know, gege?"

"Anything. Something I don't know about you yet."

Hua Cheng was quiet for a moment, thinking. "I have a collection of old medical instruments," he finally said. "From the

Civil War era.”

"Will you show me sometime?" Xie Lian asked softly.

"Of course, gege.”

Xie Lian smiled against Hua Cheng's shoulder. "Did your interest in medical history start before or after you became a doctor?"

"Before," Hua Cheng said. "My grandfather was a surgeon. He used to tell me stories about the evolution of surgical techniques. I think those stories are what first drew me to medicine. Though I never planned to be a trauma surgeon specifically. That came later."

Xie Lian hummed over this thought.

Hua Cheng's fingers traced lazy patterns on Xie Lian's arm. "What about you, gege? Tell me something I don't know about you."

Xie Lian thought for a moment. "I used to steal napkins from restaurants. After I first came here with my parents, Feng Xin, and Mu Qing—when things were at their worst—I'd go into fast food places, order the cheapest item on the menu, and take as many napkins as I could without being obvious. Sometimes straws too. Ketchup packets." He gave a small, self-deprecating laugh. "It wasn't just about saving money. It was about... control, I think. Having something in reserve."

"Did it help?"

"In a way," Xie Lian murmured. "I had this drawer in my first apartment filled with napkins and condiment packets. Sometimes when I couldn't sleep, I'd open it just to look at it. To remind myself I'd never be completely empty-handed."

And Hua Cheng hummed over this thought, too, and Xie Lian yawned again.

“Sleep?”

“Mm.” One heavy nod.

Outside, the city continued its nighttime chorus—a distant car alarm, the muffled bass from someone's stereo, the hum of the building's central air. Inside, Hua Cheng reached over to turn off the bedside lamp, plunging the room into near darkness, save for the ambient glow of the city lights trickling in speckled like baby fawn spots. The last thing Xie Lian was aware of before drifting off was Hua Cheng's lips against his hair and heavy-lipped mumbling he couldn't quite catch but understood all the same.

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During the night, the dreams came like fever. Not one or two, but a churned mess of them all tangled and wrong, blurring into each other. Xie Lian couldn’t find where one ended and another began—just the aftertaste of panic, shivery with it, and the cold sweat like clingfilm on his skin. He remembered the details of only one.

He wasn’t in it—he was watching himself, watching from somewhere behind the walls, built into the architecture. His body—a younger version, thinner, sharper at the edges—was running full-tilt through the dimly lit corridor of his old hospital in Wuhan, sprinting like the hallway might dissolve behind him if he didn’t keep moving. Five minutes, some cheap stopwatch demanded. Five minutes to run the impossible stretch of a major hospital. He knew he was being timed by someone, though by who, he wasn’t sure.

The floor stretched on and on, eating up his footsteps and never satisfied with how many he fed it. He failed. Tried again. Failed. Timer shrieking, squawking like a smoke alarm or a plastic, pitiless bird. Back to the start. Start again.

When he woke, it was to light, blinding in its peach-gold slant across the bed, soaking the corners of the duvet and whatever dreams still clung beneath it, already fading.

He was confused for a moment. The bed was too soft for a body expecting something floor-stiff and found, instead, a luxury it didn’t trust. Then he felt the steady rise and fall of the chest

beneath his cheek, and everything returned in a rush so swift it left him still.

San Lang. Of course. Inevitably, inescapably, always San Lang.

Xie Lian peeled himself away from the heat and the arms (the ever-present, ever-gentle arms), moved across the cold wood floor—*plap plap plap*, soles whispering nonsense against the grain—and shut himself into the bathroom.

Water. Face. Breath again. Human again.

When he came back, Hua Cheng had spread across the entire bed, head buried in pillow, one leg hiked up as if mid-sprint, and one arm flung out where Xie Lian had been as though seeking for his presence in half-asleep haze before being pulled back under.

It made Xie Lian smile. Not a small smile either—a full one, pulled right from his chest; Hua Cheng looked like a man who had not only slept deeply, but had gone to war with the mattress and won.

He let him sleep—of course he did. Let the war hero rest in his battlefield of blankets. So, Xie Lian made his way to the kitchen. Some kind of offering was in order: gratitude in the form of caffeine. Not tea (his preferred comfort), but coffee—*Hua Cheng's* comfort, which Xie Lian had first learned about by how Hua Cheng guarded the break room machine like it might be stolen or sullied. He opened cabinets, slow and quiet, until he found what he was looking for—beans, pre-ground thankfully—then attended to a sleek coffee machine that looked far more complicated than the simple drip brewer he had at home.

It sat there like something designed by a sadist with a design degree. Chrome. Angles. Millions of buttons—clever symbols and abbreviations—a foreign language Xie Lian didn't speak. He bent down, squinted sideways, and poked at a knob. Eventually he managed to add water, grounds, and conjure enough hope and confidence to hit a button—the big inviting one. He held his breath, half-expecting a shriek, a hiss, a sobbing wail announcing his

failure, an ejector seat even, sending him through the roof. And if it exploded, he hoped it would be a quiet explosion.

But the machine only hummed, low and satisfied, then began to dispense its woody warmth in slow, bark-toned trickles. It smelled like a habit, like someone else's morning, and he felt absurdly proud of himself.

Opening the refrigerator, he looked for milk or cream. The contents were tidy in a way that made him feel slightly judged. Produce lined up like good children. Eggs, yogurts, jars of condiments that weren't expired. The fridge of someone who cooked real meals, who had habits and favorites and plans, nothing like his own half-empty cartons and wilting leftovers.

He found half-and-half in the door and set it on the counter, then moved on to the mugs. Third cabinet: success. A small marshaling of mismatched mugs, some clearly picked up on trips, others gifts or whims. He picked two: a plain black one for Hua Cheng—clean, minimal, and for himself, a red one with "Trust me, I'm a doctor" emblazoned across it in bold, ironic confidence fitting of surgeons, who were just as capable of being wrong as anyone else and yet carried themselves with such unshakable certainty they may as well have been forged from the same thick-lined font. It made him smile.

Just as the coffee finished brewing, he heard footsteps behind him—soft, slow, the sound of sleep still dribbling out of someone's limbs. He turned, already knowing who it was.

Hua Cheng leaned against the doorframe, wearing only pajama pants and his eyepatch, hair sleep-wild and uneven. He looked rumpled and soft.

"Good morning," Xie Lian said, holding up a mug. "I made coffee. I hope that's okay."

"More than okay," Hua Cheng replied, sounding still half in a dream, yet crossed the kitchen with that strange, effortless gravity of his and took the mug. "Thank you, gege. Did you sleep well?"

"Better than I have in years," Xie Lian admitted, and it was true despite the dreams. "Your bed is... well, it's not the floor."

Hua Cheng laughed, wobbly and warm. "No, it's not. Though I still maintain that spending the night on your air mattress was one of the best nights of my life."

"Because of the near-death experience of being swallowed by it?" Xie Lian added cream to his coffee, then offered it by way of gesture to Hua Cheng, who shook his head.

Hua Cheng smiled—the kind of soft, lopsided smile worn by people who hadn't yet reassembled their brains. He took a long sip. "No cream. Tastes like regret."

Xie Lian snorted into his own mug. "I'd say it tastes like childhood. Specifically, the cafeteria kind. The little tubs they gave you at school that were always warm for some reason."

"Maybe that's where the regret comes from," Hua Cheng mused, leaning back against the counter. "What would you like to do today?"

Xie Lian blinked, looking up from his own coffee. "Do?"

"It's Saturday," Hua Cheng reminded him. "We're both off work."

"Oh! Right." Xie Lian had been so wrapped up in the events of the past few days that he'd nearly forgotten the concept of a weekend. "I usually do laundry and clean my apartment, maybe read a little."

"Thrilling," Hua Cheng teased, moving closer to tuck a loose strand of hair behind Xie Lian's ear. "Though I'm afraid your apartment will have to wait, since you're here. Unless..."

"Unless?"

"Unless gege would like to return home." Hua Cheng's tone was careful, giving Xie Lian an easy way out if he wanted it.

Xie Lian shook his head quickly. "No, I'd like to stay. If that's alright with you."

"More than alright," Hua Cheng replied, his smile returning. "In that case, I propose breakfast, then we could visit the botanical gardens? You mentioned wanting to go there."

"For your birthday," Xie Lian remembered, brightening. "That sounds wonderful."

They worked together making breakfast. Hua Cheng sliced fruit while Xie Lian attempted to make pancakes, managing somehow to flip three before ruining the fourth with a maneuver that somehow ended with batter on the ceiling.

"San Lang, I'm so sorry," Xie Lian apologized, staring up at the pale splatter with horror. "I don't know how that even happened," and Hua Cheng only laughed.

"I'll clean it up right away—"

"After breakfast," Hua Cheng insisted, steering Xie Lian to the table by his shoulders. "It's not going anywhere."

They ate at the glass dining table, sunlight streaming across their plates, their conversation chippy as the sound of their forks tapping plates. Xie Lian couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so at ease. Even with Feng Xin and Mu Qing, there was always an undercurrent of watchful concern, as if they were waiting for him to shatter or for something to go wrong.

"Penny for your thoughts?" Hua Cheng asked, cutting into his pancake.

"I was just thinking how comfortable this is," Xie Lian admitted.

"As it should be." Hua Cheng's eye crinkled at the corner. "Though I'm relieved gege feels that way. I was worried you might find my apartment too..."

"Too?"

"Sterile. I don't spend much time here besides sleeping."

"It's beautiful," Xie Lian assured him. "Though I think it could use a little mess now and then."

"Like pancake batter on the ceiling?"

"Exactly like that," Xie Lian agreed, laughing. "Consider it my contribution to the décor."

After breakfast, they cleaned up together, and as Xie Lian contemplated how to reach the pancake batter on the ceiling, he was suddenly lifted into the air with a startled squeal.

"San Lang!" he exclaimed, flailing before grabbing onto Hua Cheng's shoulders to steady himself. "What are you doing?"

"Helping," Hua Cheng replied simply, holding Xie Lian effortlessly at ceiling height. "This seemed more efficient than finding a stepladder."

Xie Lian's face flamed as he realized the position he was in—hoisted up like he weighed nothing, Hua Cheng's hands firm around his waist, their faces unexpectedly close.

"You... you could have warned me," he stammered, trying to focus on the batter splotch.

"And miss that adorable squeak?" Hua Cheng teased, adjusting his grip slightly. "Never."

"I did not squeak," Xie Lian protested weakly, dabbing at the ceiling with a damp cloth.

"If you say so, gege. Just a little to your left."

Xie Lian stretched, tongue caught between his teeth. Being this close to the ceiling made him realize how pristine it was otherwise—not a cobweb or dust speck in sight. Of course, San

Lang's home would be immaculate even in places no one ever saw.

"Got it," he announced triumphantly as the last bit of batter came away.

Instead of lowering him right then, Hua Cheng paused, gazing up at Xie Lian with wonder. "You look good up there," he remarked. "Like a deity descending to earth."

"San Lang!" Xie Lian squirmed. "Put me down before you hurt yourself."

"You weigh nothing," Hua Cheng said, but he lowered Xie Lian to the floor. "And I'm stronger than I look."

"I noticed," Xie Lian mumbled, smoothing his rumpled shirt and trying to ignore the phantom of Hua Cheng's grip on his waist.

Once the kitchen was restored to its pristine condition, they dressed for the day separately, each maintaining a shy politeness.

"Wait, gege," Hua Cheng called as they were about to leave. "I have something for you."

He disappeared into a closet and returned with a soft-looking sweater in a pale cream color. "It might be cool at the gardens. This should fit you."

Xie Lian took the sweater, running his fingers over the buttery cashmere. "San Lang, this looks expensive."

"It's just a sweater," Hua Cheng shrugged. "Besides, it doesn't suit me. The color is all wrong."

Xie Lian suspected this was a lie—the sweater looked brand new—but he slipped it on anyway. It fit perfectly, the sleeves just long enough to cover his wrists without hanging past his fingertips.

"Beautiful," Hua Cheng murmured, his gaze so appreciative that Xie Lian flushed and turned away.

"Thank you," he replied, tugging at the hem. "It's very comfortable."

The gardens were breathtaking and no further than a good walk from Hua Cheng's apartment. Flowers bloomed in well tended beds, and a light breeze carried their smell and earth, the sky above them a perfect, cloudless blue. They wandered hand in hand through themed sections—the rose garden, the Japanese garden with its koi pond, the tropical conservatory where humidity wrapped and choked them. Hua Cheng seemed to know a surprising amount about the plants, pointing out rare specimens and explaining their medicinal properties.

"How do you know all this?" Xie Lian asked as they paused before an orchid.

"I read a lot," Hua Cheng replied. "And I've traveled to some of these plants' native habitats. This species, for instance—" he gestured to the orchid, "—I first saw in Malaysia during a medical aid mission. There was a local healer who used its roots to treat infections."

"Did it work?"

"I'm not sure," Hua Cheng admitted. "I had to leave a day later."

They stopped for lunch at the garden's small café, sharing a light meal at a wrought-iron table beneath a flowering trellis. A family with young children sat nearby, the kids giggling as they fed crumbs to bold sparrows that hopped close to their table.

"Do you like children?" Xie Lian asked, watching as one of the little girls squealed with delight when a bird ate from her outstretched palm.

Hua Cheng followed his eyes. "I don't dislike them," he said carefully. "Though I've had limited experience with them outside of treating injuries."

"I think you'd be good with them," Xie Lian observed. "You

have a gentleness beneath all that trauma surgeon intimidation."

"Only for certain people," Hua Cheng replied. "What about you, gege? Do you like children?"

"I do," Xie Lian nodded. "I did volunteer work with pediatric patients in China. Their resilience is remarkable—they bounce back from procedures that would leave adults bedridden for weeks."

"And yet they're so fragile," Hua Cheng mused. "Contradictions wrapped in small packages."

After lunch, they continued their exploration, eventually finding themselves in a secluded corner of the Chinese garden, where a small pavilion stood beside a pond dotted with lily pads. They had it entirely to themselves, the other visitors having moved on to more popular sections.

Xie Lian leaned against the pavilion's railing. "There was a park near my childhood home with a structure just like this."

"Good memories?" Hua Cheng asked, coming to stand beside him.

Xie Lian nodded. "My father would take me there to practice my martial arts in the mornings. The air would be misty and everything would be quiet. It felt like we were the only people in the world."

Hua Cheng leaned against the railing. "You still practice?"

"Not formally," Xie Lian admitted. "Though sometimes I go through the forms when I can't sleep. It helps quiet my mind."

"I'd like to see that sometime," Hua Cheng said.

Xie Lian laughed softly. "Would you now?" He turned to face Hua Cheng. "Maybe I'll give you a demonstration if you're good."

"Am I not always good, gege?" Hua Cheng stepped closer, backing Xie Lian against the railing, hands coming to rest on either

side of him. "I think I deserve a reward for my exemplary behavior."

"Do you?" Xie Lian tilted his head, feeling bold in indulging Hua Cheng's petulance. "And what reward would you like?"

Hua Cheng leaned in, kissed him once—soft and sure, then again, slower. He took Xie Lian's face like it was something precious and breakable, held it still between both palms, and nibbled at his lower lip. Xie Lian's fingers gripped his shoulders, then moved upward, winding into his hair, making soft little noises that dissolved against Hua Cheng's teeth.

A distant child's laugh jolted them back to reality. Hua Cheng pulled away first, though he remained close.

"We should probably continue our tour," he suggested, voice gravelly.

They completed their tour of the gardens, dithering in the butterfly conservatory where paper-thin wings flashed jewel-like colors as their owners flitted from flower to flower. One particularly brave cabbage white butterfly landed on Xie Lian's shoulder, its wings opening and closing like it were languidly fanning itself.

"Don't move," Hua Cheng whispered, carefully taking out his phone.

Xie Lian stood perfectly still, hardly daring to breathe as Hua Cheng took several photos before the butterfly decided to move on to more interesting prospects.

"Can I see?" Xie Lian asked once the butterfly had flown away.

Hua Cheng showed him the photos—in each one, Xie Lian's face was captured in profile, his expression one of wide-eyed wonder, the butterfly perched on his shoulder like an exotic epaulette.

"You look like you belong in a fairy tale," Hua Cheng observed, tucking his phone away.

"The janitor and the butterfly," Xie Lian joked. "Not the most compelling storyline."

"The disguised prince and his faithful companion," Hua Cheng corrected. "Much more intriguing."

"San Lang!" Xie Lian laughed, embarrassed. "You really must stop with the flattery."

"It's not flattery if it's true," Hua Cheng replied, completely serious. "You carry yourself like royalty even in hospital scrubs, gege."

By the time they left the gardens, the afternoon was fading toward cardinal-red evening. They decided to visit a nearby market, where stalls offered everything from fresh produce to handcrafted jewelry. Xie Lian was drawn to a vendor selling handmade soaps, each one shaped like a different flower and infused with varying smells.

"These are beautiful," he said, lifting one to his nose—lavender, he deduced.

"They're made with goat's milk," the vendor explained. "Wonderful for sensitive skin."

Hua Cheng appeared at his side, examining the display. "Do you have a favorite, gege?"

"I like this one," Xie Lian replied, indicating the lavender blossom. "But they're all lovely."

Without hesitation, Hua Cheng pulled out his wallet. "We'll take six—two of the lavender, and one each of your other bestsellers."

"San Lang!" Xie Lian protested. "That's too many."

"Not at all," Hua Cheng replied as the vendor wrapped each soap in tissue paper. "Three for your apartment, three for mine."

The casual assumption that they would be sharing spaces, trading scents; it made Xie Lian's heart flutter, and he fell silent, watching as Hua Cheng paid and accepted the neatly wrapped package. They continued through the market, stopping occasionally to sample honey or admire handcrafted ceramics. At a stall selling tea, Hua Cheng purchased several varieties after consulting with Xie Lian about his preferences.

"You're spending too much," Xie Lian said quietly as they moved away from the tea vendor.

"Am I?" Hua Cheng seemed genuinely surprised. "I don't think so."

"I can't reciprocate," Xie Lian admitted, hating the words even as they left his mouth. "My budget…"

"Gege, I'm not keeping a tally. I buy these things because they bring me joy—either directly, or through your enjoyment of them. That's all."

"But—"

"No buts," Hua Cheng interrupted gently. "If it makes you uncomfortable, I'll stop. But please don't deny me this simple pleasure out of concern for some imaginary balance sheet."

Put that way, Xie Lian found it difficult to argue further. "I just don't want you to think I'm... taking advantage."

Hua Cheng's laugh was incredulous. "Taking advantage? Gege, you've spent your entire life giving to others. Let someone give to you for once. Are you hungry? There's a restaurant nearby that I think you'd like. Small, family-owned. They make hand-pulled noodles."

"That sounds perfect."

The restaurant was indeed small—just ten tables in a cozy, well-lit space—but the aroma that greeted them was heavenly.

"Hua Cheng!" The elderly woman behind the counter beamed at him. "It's been too long!"

"Mrs. Li," Hua Cheng greeted her. "I've been busy at the hospital."

"Always working, this one," Mrs. Li said to Xie Lian, her accent laid on thick. "And this?"

Xie Lian smiled politely. He had an accent too, though it was so faint most people never noticed. His family had spent years shuttling back and forth between the U.S. and China, visiting relatives for months at a time. As a result, he'd grown up learning English and Mandarin in tandem.

"This is Xie Lian," Hua Cheng replied proudly.

Mrs. Li smiled, looking Xie Lian up and down appraisingly. "Too skinny! Need more meat on your bones. You eat too little, I can tell."

Before Xie Lian could protest, she was already pulling them along. "Lai, lai, lai, best table for you." She tapped the wooden screen for emphasis. "Good feng shui here."

Once they were seated, she patted Hua Cheng's shoulder. "Normal?"

"Yes, please," Hua Cheng nodded. "And... a bottle of the Shaoxing wine? The good one you keep in the back."

Mrs. Li's eyebrows shot up, and she gave Hua Cheng a conspiratorial look. "Ahhh, special occasion!" She leaned closer to Xie Lian, speaking as if sharing a secret. "Made from glutinous rice, very smooth, not like American alcohol. Good for stomach."

She hurried away before either could respond, leaving them in relative privacy.

"You come here often?" Xie Lian asked.

"When I can," Hua Cheng replied. "Mr. Li was my first patient when I came to Tonglu. Heart attack—massive, nearly fatal. She says I saved her husband's life, though I maintain that the credit belongs to his stubbornness."

"Where is he now?"

"Working the kitchen," Hua Cheng nodded toward the back. "Nothing keeps him down for long, not even a failing heart. They immigrated from Zhejiang province thirty years ago and built this place from nothing."

Mrs. Li returned with a ceramic carafe and two small cups, placing them on the table. "Wine first, then food. Warm your body." She poured a small amount into each cup, nodding approvingly. "Good color, good aroma."

Xie Lian hesitated, picking up his cup. "I don't usually drink..."

"Ah! Good boy," Mrs. Li beamed at him. "But little bit okay with special friend." She winked at Hua Cheng. "I bring food soon."

As she bustled away, Xie Lian looked uncertainly at the cup in his hand. "San Lang, I really shouldn't..."

"We're walking distance from my apartment," Hua Cheng explained. "But if gege doesn't want to, then he doesn't have to.

Xie Lian considered for a moment, hesitantly, then smiled. "Well..." He raised his cup. "To new beginnings?"

"To new beginnings," Hua Cheng echoed and touched his cup to Xie Lian's.

The wine was warm and slightly sweet at first, with more complex notes blooming as it slid down his throat. He couldn't help the small sound of appreciation that escaped him.

"Good?" Hua Cheng smiled, watching him.

"Very," Xie Lian admitted, taking another small sip.

Their food arrived soon after—steaming bowls of hand-pulled noodles in rich broth, topped with tender beef and vibrant greens. Before Mrs. Li left, she topped off their cups with a satisfied nod.

"Eat, eat!"

The first bite took Xie Lian back to his residency days when he'd survived on similar meals from street vendors near the hospital. The wine made his head feel sunshine-glowy, making each mouthful more satisfying, and by the time they'd finished half their bowls, Xie Lian was feeling a pleasant warmth trickling to the tips of his limbs like dew rolling down one leaf to the next, softening the edges of any worries.

"Another?" Hua Cheng asked, lifting the carafe.

Xie Lian glanced at his nearly empty cup and nodded, giving a little giggle. "Why not?"

“When was the last time you drank?” Hua Cheng poured.

“Medical school graduation. I had two small cups and could barely walk straight.”

"And now?" Hua Cheng's eye twinkled. "How do you feel, gege?"

"Light," Xie Lian admitted with another giggle. "And warm.”

Were he sober, he would’ve had the mind to choose the word ‘porous,’ for it was as if every edge of him had been drawn through warm water and left to soften. It made him more willing. Not careless—he’d never be careless—but pliable, in the way fabric becomes easier to knot when damp.

When they finally finished, Mrs. Li returned, setting down two small cups of warm red bean soup, glancing at their empty carafe with approval. "You enjoy wine? Make face red, good

circulation."

Xie Lian felt his cheeks self-consciously for their fuzzy warmth.

"Could we get another bottle to take home?" Hua Cheng asked.

Mrs. Li's face lit up. "Of course!" She leaned closer to Xie Lian. "Dr. Hua never bring friend before. You must be very special. He good man, best doctor. Save my husband." She patted Xie Lian's hand. "You too skinny though. Come back, I feed you more."

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Xie Lian stepped out of the restaurant a little off-kilter, the world tilting gently beneath his feet, not quite spinning. He drifted toward Hua Cheng without thinking, bumping against him once, twice, apologizing both times. Hua Cheng held their haul from the day and the wine—wrapped in brown paper and good intentions—in one hand, and with the other, he curled his arm around Xie Lian’s waist like it belonged there, pulling him to his side.

"The stars are so bright tonight," Xie Lian observed, tilting his head back to look at the sky. The motion made him stumble, and Hua Cheng tightened his grip.

"Careful, gege," he murmured, steadying him. "I don’t want you fall and crack your head open. I'd never hear the end of it from Feng Xin."

This sent Xie Lian into another fit of giggles. "He'd lecture you for hours, and Mu Qing would just stand there with that disapproving look..."

"He'd be insufferable," Hua Cheng agreed, guiding Xie Lian around a puddle on the sidewalk. "We'd never hear the end of it."

Xie Lian leaned more heavily against Hua Cheng's side, finding the solid warmth of him reassuring as the world continued its gentle tilt and sway. The night air was cool against his flushed

cheeks, and the stars above seemed to pulse and dance in time with his heartbeat, working slow and easy rather than panic-fluttered.

"San Lang," he said suddenly, stopping in the middle of the sidewalk and turning to face Hua Cheng with what he hoped was a serious expression. "I need to tell you something important."

"What is it, gege?"

"I..." Xie Lian paused, frowned thoughtfully, then broke into a wide smile. "I really like your apartment. And your bed. And your coffee machine, even though it tried to intimidate me this morning."

"Is that so?"

"Mm-hmm," Xie Lian nodded vigorously, then immediately regretted it as the world spun a little faster. "Whoa."

"Easy," Hua Cheng murmured, steadying him once more. "We're almost home. Can you make it a few more blocks?"

"Of course I can," Xie Lian protested, drawing himself up with dignity.

They continued their walk, Xie Lian making a concentrated effort to walk straight, though he couldn't help but notice the way his feet were determined to follow a curved path. By the time they reached Hua Cheng's building, the cool night air had cleared his head somewhat, though warmth still coursed through his veins and tipped him inwards.

The security guard nodded to them as they entered the lobby. In the elevator, Xie Lian leaned against the wall, watching Hua Cheng's reflection in the polished doors.

"You're very handsome," he announced without preamble. This stouthearted side of him wasn’t a sudden thing, but creeping, molasses-like, ambered with the wine. That quiet voice in the back of his head—the one that cautioned and corrected, that reminded him to be polite, to defer, to demur—had been lulled half-asleep by its sweetness, its head lolling in the passenger seat.

Hua Cheng turned to him, eyebrow raised. "Am I?"

"Yes," Xie Lian nodded decisively. "Especially when you do surgery. You get this... look." He tried to imitate what he meant—focused, brows drawn together, lips pressed thin—but succeeded only in making a face that caused Hua Cheng to laugh out loud.

"I'm serious!" Xie Lian protested, fighting his own smile. "You get all..." he waved his hands vaguely, pitching the only word he could find, "focused."

"Thank you, gege," Hua Cheng said, still smiling. "Though I'm not sure my surgery face is my most attractive feature."

"All your features are attractive," Xie Lian informed him. The elevator doors opened, and he pushed himself off the wall. "Especially your hands."

"My hands?"

"Mm-hmm. They're very capable." He watched while Hua Cheng unlocked the apartment door. "They can fix hearts and stop bleeding and braid hair and cook salmon."

Hua Cheng chuckled, setting the wine on the entryway table with a glassy clink and helped Xie Lian out of his sweater. "I'm glad gege approves of my hands."

Inside the apartment, the city lights sparkled through the floor-to-ceiling windows, creating a galaxy of reflections on the polished floors. Xie Lian moved to the windows, pressing his palms against the cool glass as he gazed out at the urban landscape below.

"It's like we're floating above everything," he mused. "All those lights. All those people."

He felt rather than heard Hua Cheng approach, strong arms wrapping around his waist and a chin coming to rest on his shoulder.

"What's gege thinking?"

"That the world is very big and very small all at once." Xie Lian leaned back, tilting his head to expose his neck where Hua Cheng planted a kiss, making a humming noise that pushed Xie Lian's ramble along.

"The stars seem closer too," Xie Lian added. "Like the sky bent lower…" just enough to press its glittering face against his and say *look—look how easy it is to want things.*

Hua Cheng hummed, mossy soft. A question had been circling Xie Lian's mind like a trapped insect. Now, with Hua Cheng mouthing toward his ear like it already knew what he might ask, it slipped out.

"San Lang, have you... ever been with someone before?"

He felt Hua Cheng pause, then another kiss. "I told you before, gege, I've dated people."

Xie Lian shook his head. "No, no, not like that. I meant..."

Hua Cheng raised a brow. "Does gege mean have I ever *fucked* someone before?"

Xie Lian's face erupted in a shade of crimson that put the wine's efforts to shame. "San Lang!" He tried to twist away but couldn't, trapped in Hua Cheng's hold. "That's not—I didn't—"

Hua Cheng tilted his head. “No? Then what did gege mean?”

"I just meant..." He swallowed, collar too tight. Why was it harder to say now? "Physical... intimacy."

"Hmm." Hua Cheng snorted. "Is that what they taught you to call it in medical school? 'Physical intimacy'?"

"Please stop teasing me," Xie Lian whined.

"But you're so beautiful when you blush, gege… To answer your question. Yes, I’ve been with people. Though not many and not recently. Does that bother you?"

Xie Lian shook his head too fast. Vertigo did a cartwheel over his brain stem. “No! No, of course not. I just… I haven’t…”

"Oh really? Never? With an ass like this?"

Hua Cheng’s hand slid down. He palmed Xie Lian's ass with a starfish grip, the plush fat of it bulging between his fingers.

Xie Lian spooked. "San Lang! You can't—that's not—!"

"Not what?" Hua Cheng squeezed again. "Not proper? Not something a respectable trauma surgeon should do? You can tell me to stop," he added more seriously, thumb moving in coaxing arcs over its curve. "Whatever gege wants."

"I don't want you to stop," Xie Lian admitted. "I'm just… not used to this."

"Then I have to make gege used to it."

"You're impossible," he fussed, but with laughter.

"Mmm. And yet here you are." Hua Cheng's palm slid under his shirt, over his spine. His other hand brushed hair from Xie Lian's cheek. "Gege is pink all the way down his neck. I wonder how far it goes?"

"San Lang!"

"What? It's a medical question. I *am* a doctor, after all."

"A trauma surgeon, not a dermatologist."

"True," Hua Cheng conceded. "But I still have a professional interest in your circulation. Speaking of which, you seem warm." He pressed the back of his hand to Xie Lian's forehead. "Yes, definitely an elevated temperature, and as your doctor, I'd recommend a cool shower."

He scooped Xie Lian up, one arm behind the knees, the other bracing his back. Xie Lian burrowed into Hua Cheng's shirt to hide. Shame was a pyromaniac, his chest a furnace, body buzzing like struck glass. The bathroom door swung wide and Xie Lian's back met the mirror, cool glass kissing skin through his shirt. Hua Cheng nudged between his thighs. Suddenly, his body was louder than his thoughts, itching to be touched and felt.

Strange, how this shell—so long inhabited, so rarely known—could become so urgently present, so demanding of attention. He

had lived in it like one rents an apartment: occupant, not owner. Acknowledging its needs, never its wants. But now, under Hua Cheng's hands, tugging his threads loose, he was being introduced to it like a stranger.

Those hands worked up and down Xie Lian's thighs; hungry, kneading muscle. They kissed, gentle and slow at first, then eager, tongues chasing wine-sweet heat tucked in the pink of their smiles.

Hua Cheng retreated, smirking victory. Xie Lian made a weak, surrendering sound and lunged after him, nearly toppling off the counter had Hua Cheng not caught him.

All his life, Xie Lian had given his flesh so little; it rarely demanded, hardly needed. Hasty, mechanical release in scarce moments before sleep or during showers; sometimes before a med school exam to calm his nerves. And now Hua Cheng was awakening something new: foolish, delirious spinning. Inside, something was opening its eyes, something comfortable and eager with San Lang. The 'adult-illiterate' part of him was wedged between wanting to flee and wanting to seek new pleasure.

He pulled back to breathe—to remember how, rather—and Hua Cheng leaned in after him like a tide. They were tethered on opposite ends of an ocean-churned ship. One fell away and the other was drawn forth, helpless and bound to the same wild swing.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng snarled, displeased by Xie Lian's ass retreating against the mirror. He grabbed behind the knees and yanked Xie Lian forward with a startled yip, legs snapping shut around Hua Cheng's middle like a sprung trap.

Without thinking, Xie Lian ground against him, simultaneously relieved this wasn't disappointing him, yet terrified by the voice insisting Hua Cheng was only half-hard, and still *that*. Friction struck a match sideways inside his skull: bright, thrilling. His mouth fell open on a whine chasing it again, grinding his hips against Hua Cheng's thigh this time.

Between the wet sounds of their spit-slicked kisses came panting. Hot, open-mouthed gasps like they were drowning

between each contact and only finding air in each other. Hua Cheng's fingers worked Xie Lian's inner thigh, thumb digging greedy for skin and muscle and bruises, tiny pomegranate galaxies created by him, for him, manufactured excuses to press his mouth there later.

Xie Lian broke open with sound; he squealed. Hua Cheng rolled his hips and the pressure felled him. He collapsed forward like a structure failing, arms flung around Hua Cheng's shoulders, face buried in his neck, breath all fever-begging.

"Sang Lang, *Sang Lang*…"

Hua Cheng found his chin, coaxing him out of hiding to suck his lips, pulling the bottom one with a wet, sucking pop. Then he trailed down to his neck, nosing against silk-skin. He grinned like an idiot when it feathered Xie Lian into a giggle fit.

"A–ahaha! Stop, that tickles!"

Hua Cheng hummed, delighted to chase him through it. His mouth worked at Xie Lian's throat, teething and sucking purpling blooms into his skin. One hand slipped under Xie Lian's shirt, mapping soft fat and muscle both. He confirmed every imagined detail of Xie Lian's body against its reality. He found every surprise pleasant, even the tiny scar cluster of pinhead divots below his armpit.

"Molluscum virus?" he asked.

Xie Lian nodded into his shoulder. "Mmn, when I was a kid."

"Can I?" he asked, tugging the shirt's hem.

Wine had made Xie Lian gutsy, but it was San Lang who made him feel safe. He lifted his arms and Hua Cheng stripped him in one smooth motion, flinging the shirt aside. Cold glass smeared his back and he shivered. He arched away from it toward Hua Cheng.

"Is gege eager?" he laughed, low and pleased. His thumb

caught on something—a scar below Xie Lian's ribs, thin-lipped and heavily faded now, but the texture was still distinctly raised. "What's this?"

Xie Lian's hands covered his, gently pushing them away. "Oh, I don't even remember," he said with a small laugh, then guided Hua Cheng's palms upward to his chest. "Just another one of those scars we get over our lifetimes."

Hua Cheng ducked and took a nipple between his teeth. Sharp pain, then soft pull, wet tongue smoothing the sting. Xie Lian gasped. His hips jumped, grinding against the waistband of his underwear, against Hua Cheng's stomach, against nothing-air if it might give something back.

"Fuck," Hua Cheng groaned, thrusting his hand between Xie Lian's thighs. He palmed the outline of his cock and squeezed, hot and damp through the fabric. Xie Lian choked, head tipping back into the mirror.

Hua Cheng pulled off his shirt in one motion, back muscles rolling smooth, hair sweat-damp and clinging. The tattoo along his arm flexed. His chest was lean, tapered, lines carved clean from shoulder to hip, where there was a thin trail of dark hair that disappeared into his waistband.

Xie Lian could only gawk, frazzled, one leg braced on the counter to keep from falling.

Hua Cheng smiled. "See something you like, gege?"

Already pink-cheeked, Xie Lian spilled red across his whole face. "Yes."

"You look warm. I should cool you down like I said. Sorry gege, I got distracted."

Hua Cheng twisted the shower's main dial behind them, for there were many, and the water woke roaring, pipe-growling, steam billowing in thick.

“Wait.” Xie Lian reached for him. “Our pants.”

“An excellent point,” Hua Cheng agreed, already undoing the button on Xie Lian’s jeans.

Xie Lian held his breath watching those dutiful hands. They’d touched other people before like this—he knew that now, had always guessed—and still, he felt special. He lifted his hips and Hua Cheng eased the jeans down, careful past his ankles without a snag. Then he was nearly bare, gray cotton boxers, butterfly-print snug over his dick.

Hua Cheng hooked a finger under the waistband and snapped it. “These are cute.”

“San Lang…” Xie Lian breathed, fixated dumbly on Hua Cheng’s face.

“Yes, gege?” Hua Cheng smiled a canine-tipped smile, but he was so gentle-handed, so patient, that he resembled a hunter dipping a cupped palm into a stream, waiting for the fish to come close on their own.

Xie Lian gestured vaguely to Hua Cheng’s trousers. “You too?”

"Would gege like to do it for me?"

Hands fluttering, Xie Lian swallowed and nodded.

Hua Cheng rocked their hips together and palmed at his ass. The hard outline of his cock was intimidating pressed up against Xie Lian’s. Xie Lian’s eyes dropped before he could stop them, then snapped back up, face burning like he’d touched something he wasn’t supposed to.

"Oh," he breathed, hands floating at Hua Cheng’s belt.

“Take your time.” Hua Cheng nuzzled into his neck. “I’m not going anywhere.”

Xie Lian's fingers followed the belt around Hua Cheng's hips. They trembled at the buckle and held it until it warmed and beaded damp with his palm sweat. Everything felt pin-prick sharp, but also fuzzy and hazed out around the edges.

He wanted this. Of course he did. Wanted-wanted-wanted. But want wasn't the same as ready. Some craven part of him wished to freeze the moment and ogle, to remain suspended in this exact second where pleasure buzzed through his system like carbonation in the blood, where nothing could be done incorrectly, because nothing was yet complete.

He remembered something from medical training. Somatic intelligence. The body knowing before the mind caught up. He'd never expected to feel it so vividly. His rationality stalled at the cliff's edge of inexperience, while his body hurled itself off, heart pounding, skin over-sensitized, dick hard enough it hurt a little. The disconnect between these two kinds of knowing was what those lectures droned on about.

"I—" he began apologizing, but San Lang had promised to take all of him, hadn't he?

Swallowing his uncertainties and a deep breath, he fumbled with buckle and zipper (which snagged halfway, and for a moment he just stared at it, stupidly, like it might undo itself.) He didn't know everything, though he knew what he wanted and who he wanted. San Lang would guide him through the rest.

With the belt gone, Hua Cheng kicked free, trousers sailing across the room—*WHAP!*—against the bathroom door. Then went his boxers. Then Xie Lian's too, forgotten in a heap.

Xie Lian gasped. "San Lang, that…"

There stood Hua Cheng, glory-naked, unreasonably equipped. His cock swung pendulous-ridiculous between strong, long legs, flushed eager-dark and veined along the shaft.

For a moment, Xie Lian felt disoriented. *How did I get here? What led to this?*

Hua Cheng's laugh was warm and pleased. "Is gege intimidated?"

Xie Lian hummed wobbly agreement, fixated on what his clinical brain registered as an *anatomical outlier. A statistical improbability.*

Steam ghosted over the mirror. Water-jewels formed and trailed glass bead paths down Hua Cheng's chest, catching in the valleys between muscles. He extended a hand. “Shower?”

Xie Lian let himself be pulled from counter to tile to warm water. It didn’t just fall on them, but created a separate reality, he felt, a transparent room within a room where different rules applied. Where, though he still hesitated to touch Hua Cheng like something unaffordable, there was certainty that he could. He closed his eyes, breathed as rivulets coursed over his face, plastering hair down his cheeks and neck. When he opened them, Hua Cheng was watching him: awe-struck and heat-stunned.

Xie Lian resisted the urge to cover himself. “San Lang…”

“Mm?” Hua Cheng’s hands slid around his waist.

“I don’t know what to do…”

“That’s okay.” Hua Cheng stroked a thumb along his cheek. “I’ll show you. But you have to tell me if you don’t like something. Promise?”

Xie Lian nodded; it came out with a whimper.

Hua Cheng kissed his temple and reached for the body wash on the built-in shelf. He popped the lid—tear-free, it was labeled—and poured a palmful, working it to a froth. “Turn around for me?”

Xie Lian turned, chest tight with too-quick breath. The world was spinning now that he was standing—a group effort of wine, steam, and most of all: *San Lang.* He braced his palms against the fogged glass, water dripping from his elbows, hair sticking down his spine.

The first touch of lathered hands to his back made him jolt—but gentle, always gentle, as all San Lang parts seemed to be. Fingers moved in slow circles across his shoulder blades, trailing soap-slick spirals down his spine. They kneaded into muscle knots, thumbed along vertebrae. When Hua Cheng reached his lower back, one hand smoothed over the curve of his hip.

"You're so soft," he murmured, and Xie Lian let out a breathy sound.

Hua Cheng's palm cupped one cheek, kneading it. "And here…" His voice dropped. "So round. You've been hiding this from me, gege?"

Xie Lian tried to say *don't tease,* but it came out a squeak. He arched back into it, thighs clenching when Hua Cheng's fingers spread him, just enough to slide two fingers between his cheeks before moving lower, gliding over thighs, knees, calves.

"You're trembling." Hua Cheng drug his knuckles through the dip behind Xie Lian's knees. "Does this feel good?"

"Yes," Xie Lian gasped. "It—mmnh—it does."

"Let me do the front."

Xie Lian turned, lip caught in his teeth. Hua Cheng worked up a fresh lather and began again at the collarbones, sweeping down. He traced along Xie Lian's chest, skimmed over his nipples just enough to make him shudder. Hua Cheng smiled and returned to them, rolling one nipple between his fingers until it stiffened and Xie Lian was squirming, his hands curling into Hua Cheng's shoulders.

"You're so reactive, gege," he purred. "I barely touch you and…"

Xie Lian keened, eyes fluttering shut. Hua Cheng kissed the corner of his mouth, down his jaw, then to the warm angle beneath his ear. His hands kept moving—down Xie Lian's ribs, over his stomach, following the soft v-line below his navel, over hips, then

thigh tops—until one finally wrapped around the base of Xie Lian's cock.

Xie Lian gasped, hips stuttering forward before he stilled himself.

"Can I wash you here too?"

A tiny nod. Eyes shut.

"I need to hear you say it."

"Yes. Yes, please—"

Hua Cheng wrapped his hand around him and stroked up, slow, soap-slick. His thumb dragged along the underside where the skin was thinnest, most sensitive. He circled the ridge, drawing a choked sound.

"Ahn—San Lang—"

He paused at the tip, brushing his thumb over the slit. A clear bead welled there, which he smeared down the shaft.

"Already dripping for me? Fuck, gege… look at you."

Xie Lian bit his lip so hard he tasted blood and winced.

"Don't do that," Hua Cheng chided softly, thumb brushing over his mouth. "Don't hurt yourself."

He twisted his wrist on the upstroke, wracking Xie Lian with a partial-body shiver. One hand pumped rhythmically while the other slipped underneath, kneading the tender skin behind his balls, brushing the seam between his thighs. Water sluiced down Hua Cheng's chest, along his arms, catching in the crooks of his elbows and the flex of his wrists. His touch wasn't rushed. Wasn't even performative. He handled Xie Lian like he were a beating, bleeding heart, his hands stained red with their reverence.

He adjusted grip—tight on the upstroke, palm dragging over

the head each time. He watched Xie Lian intently: the way his mouth fell open without sound, the flutter of his eyes half-shut, then wide again. He clung to Hua Cheng's shoulders and carved shallow nail crescents into them. His whole body was tight—hips twitching with the urge to thrust into that fist—but he held back. He always kept himself in check.

"Don't hold back, gege," Hua Cheng coaxed, leaning over to mouth at Xie Lian's throat.

So Xie Lian's hips jerked forward—the first true thrust he'd let himself have. His cock slid through Hua Cheng's fist with slick ease. "Ah—ahh—ahhn…"

Even when he'd masturbated in his lonesome, it hadn't felt this way. Hua Cheng poured pleasure into hollows he hadn't known he possessed, tingly even in the backs of his knees.

Hua Cheng smiled against his skin and kissed up along his jaw in reward. His thumb returned to the spot beneath the head, rubbing tight, slow circles. Xie Lian gave a strangled cry and went taut, legs shaking. He clung to Hua Cheng's shoulders like they were the only thing keeping him upright.

"Go on," Hua Cheng purred. "Come for me."

His orgasm didn't crest so much as detonate, a full-body shudder that felt like riding a flare into his bones. His cock twitched in Hua Cheng's grip, spilling hot spurts across knuckles, his own stomach—washed away almost instantly by the shower spray. The world dropped out. He saw nothing. Heard nothing but silence rising in his ears like pressure in a plane cabin.

His mouth fell open around a cry—"Ah—ngh—!"—dissolved into soft, helpless whimpers.

Hua Cheng kissed his temple, over and over. "You're so beautiful like this," he murmured. "Fuck, I could come just from watching you fall apart."

Xie Lian sagged against him, chest heaving, skin flushed

dusky-pink cheeks to chest. He was still trembling—those fine, involuntary aftershocks that melted him. Low, ruined sounds slipped with each shaky breath. *"Hnn… mmn…"* His body slumped heavy, pliant, soaking in the warmth. He rested his forehead to Hua Cheng's shoulder, blinking slow and dazed, like just waking.

Then, with a backward tilt of his head: "But San Lang… you haven't…"

Hua Cheng's mouth curved, soft and fond. "You don't have to, gege. That's not why I—"

"No," Xie Lian cut in, firmer now, though his voice was afterglow-slurred. His eyes were wide, tender-shaming. He looked wrecked and somehow still the most luminous, earnest creature Hua Cheng had ever seen. "I want to."

He said it like it was the most obvious thing in the world. Of course he'd want to give back. Of course he'd want to see Hua Cheng come apart. Of course he'd want to be the making of it.

And Hua Cheng—fuck, what else could he do?—stood no chance. Xie Lian had willingly dropped to his knees.

Rivers coursed down the curve of his spine, through the wet hair flattening against his cheeks and shoulders. Hua Cheng had insisted he kneel where the water hit his back—*I want you to stay warm, gege*—while he stood in the dry corner, out of the stream. Xie Lian was still catching his breath (had even almost slipped on the slick tile while kneeling) but his hands were steady when he wrapped one around Hua Cheng's cock. It jumped against his palm: hot, heavy, blood-fattened. He hesitated, thumbing up the shaft experimentally. The heat of it. The weight. It left him breathless again and shy.

He looked up. *Am I doing this right? Is this okay?*

Hua Cheng's eyes were wine-weighted, mouth tilted crooked. He looked down like he'd just stumbled into the best dream of his life. "Hi, gege."

Xie Lian blushed and gave a shaky laugh, then leaned in to kiss the tip. Tentative. A little off-center. He opened his mouth, tongue flicking out to taste the slick there, then paused to frown, considering whether or not he liked it. It was a sort of salty musk—rich, mineral, sharp on the edges but mellow underneath. Somehow it made his eyelids feel heavy and his pulse slow. Then he opened wider and took just the head between his lips.

It was strange—bigger than expected, stretching his jaw in a way he wasn't used to. He didn't know how much suction to use. The first attempt was too shallow, too tight, and then his teeth accidentally grazed the shaft.

Hua Cheng hissed through his teeth, hips twitching.

Xie Lian pulled back instantly, mortified. "Sorry—sorry, I—"

"Gege," Hua Cheng gasped. "You're fine. You're—*fuck*—you're learning. I'm just so sensitive right now."

"I want to do it right."

"You will. You *are*. Just go slow."

Xie Lian nodded, lips glossy, ears buzzing hot. He adjusted his grip at the base, angled himself better, and tried again—more careful this time. Slower. He eased forward, not deep, just enough to get used to the stretch and weight. He kept his teeth away, jaw looser, tongue curled under the shaft as he sucked gently. He gave a shaky moan—*"mmnh"*—that vibrated down Hua Cheng's cock.

Hua Cheng swore, one hand braced against the tile, the other sliding into Xie Lian's hair. "Fuck, your *mouth*—"

It was messy. Xie Lian's breath stuttered through his nose, and his coordination was mostly shot. His hand, his lips, the rhythm—none of it quite lined up, but he adjusted. Twisting his wrist while bobbing shallowly made Hua Cheng groan loudest, he learned, head knocking softly against the tile.

"Just like that," Hua Cheng gasped. "God—just like that,

gege."

For a moment, Xie Lian marveled at how sensitive Hua Cheng was—how in all else, he was stoic and reticent. He blinked up at him, water streaming into his eyes, jaw already aching. His hand pumped what his mouth couldn't reach, tongue flicking beneath the shaft. He swallowed around the head, pushing further, then gagged and coughed, instinct wrenching him off.

Hua Cheng's fingers pet through his hair. "Keep going like that, and I'm gonna come all over your pretty face."

Xie Lian shivered. He found his measure, then—mouth working in brief plunges, hand following in tandem; still clumsy, still uncertain. He liked this—the closeness of it, the *effect* he was having.

He broke off again with a wet gasp, lungs pulling hard. Hua Cheng's cock spit-glistened and twitched; it was so close to his nose he went cross-eyed looking at it, only to flinch back from the dizzying prickle it triggered between his eyes—an ache like his skull had blinked. For a moment, he just knelt there gulping air, heart pounding so loud it drowned out the waterfall. He swayed slightly.

Hua Cheng caught his chin before he could tip forward. "Hey. Easy."

His hands trembled in fists against his thighs. He didn't know if it was from nerves or what. "San Lang…" His voice turned small, bashful, but also quiet in a thinking-way. The way he sounded when he was about to talk himself into doing something foolish or brave or both.

Hua Cheng's smile tilted. "Mn? What does gege need?"

Xie Lian looked up at him through sodden lashes, cheeks blooming. His throat moved on a swallow.

"Say it," Hua Cheng cooed. "Don't get all quiet on me now. You're down there with your mouth all wet and your face so pretty."

Xie Lian made a strangled noise, something halfway between a whimper and a squeak, and looked away owl-eyed.

"You didn't stop just to get shy," Hua Cheng purred. "Not after you moaned on my cock."

"I want…" Xie Lian tried—and failed—to finish the sentence.

Hua Cheng brushed a knuckle along Xie Lian's jaw. "Does gege want me to fuck his mouth again?" he asked. When Xie Lian sucked breath and shook his head, he smiled, dropping his voice, "What is gege thinking, hm?"

Such soft coaxing ran Xie Lian through with shivers. His cock twitched back to life, and a high, helpless sound slipped as he bit his lip, teeth dimpling pink flesh.

Hua Cheng crouched. He smoothed a thumb over Xie Lian's bottom lip—*careful gege*. "Tell me what you want."

"I want you to fuck me," Xie Lian mumbled.

"Fuck you *where*, gege? You have to tell me."

Xie Lian looked like he might melt and slip down the drain.

Hua Cheng leaned in, voice pitched just above a murmur. "Not your mouth. You already told me that. So where? Want me inside you? Want me to stretch that pretty ass open and keep you full?"

Xie Lian whimpered.

"That one?" Hua Cheng purred. "You want me to fuck your ass?"

Xie Lian nodded, desperate—but Hua Cheng didn't accept it.

"Use your words."

"I… I want you to fuck my ass," Xie Lian said, voice breaking

on the last word.

Hua Cheng kissed the corner of his mouth. “There’s my brave gege. Can you stand?”

Xie Lian nodded. Or tried to. It was less yes and more soft, post-orgasm ragdoll. His knees wobbled when he tried them. Hua Cheng bent to lift him, but Xie Lian pressed a weak palm to his chest.

“Wait—just—give me a second—”

He rose unsteadily, staggering toward the towel hook on the door. His entire body gleamed, pink-flushed and water-slick, droplets racing the smooth stones of his spine (was San Lang eyeing his butt? He felt self-conscious.) Grabbing a towel, he wrapped it low around his hips; oversized, cloud-soft, the knot barely holding, but he clutched the edge two-handed like it was his armor.

Then he turned, blinked at Hua Cheng. “What?” he asked, a little sulky.

Hua Cheng observed him for a moment: towel barely clinging, collarbones stained sunset-pink, legs trembling like some newborn creature. He burst into laughter.

“You’re adorable,” he said, grinning.

"I just—be quiet," Xie Lian muttered, blush crawling to his hairline. "It's cold."

“Oh, of course,” Hua Cheng said solemnly, stepping forward to scoop him up, towel and all. “Gege’s not modest. Gege’s *chilly*. My mistake.”

“I *am,*” Xie Lian insisted, hiding in Hua Cheng’s shoulder. “And exposed.”

Hua Cheng bore Xie Lian from the bathroom like he was ferrying royalty, snagging a towel of his own without breaking stride. Xie Lian burrowed closer, hiding in the crook of his neck,

skin prickling all over. At the bed, Hua Cheng laid him into the sheets.

“Want to keep this on?” he teased, tugging the towel with no real effort.

Xie Lian gave a small, breathy “Maybe.”

Hua Cheng leaned down, dripping, and kissed him. “Then I guess I’ll just have to unwrap my present.”

Xie Lian’s chest lifted in a stuttering rise. The towel sat loose at his waist, legs falling open. Water jeweled the fine hair on his thighs, and the flush had conquered territory down to his navel.

"Don't look at me that way.” He glanced sideways.

“Which way?” Hua Cheng braced his arms on either side of him. “Like you’re the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen?”

Xie Lian strangled a groan. “Like I’m going to combust.”

“Is gege going to combust? Why didn’t he warn me?” Hua Cheng’s hand slipped under the towel to his hipbone, thumb stroking lazy circles into damp skin. “Can I take this off?”

Xie Lian worried his lip and nodded, not looking while Hua Cheng peeled him open like some shy night flower. He was half-hard, thighs mottled roseate, stomach fluttering. Again, he moved to shield himself with his hands, but Hua Cheng caught his wrists and pinned them above his head.

“Will your highness indulge me?”

He kissed down the line of Xie Lian’s throat, then lower, dragging his mouth chest-center. Each claimed inch harvested a tremor or a gasp. He licked across a nipple and savored the writhing—bit at his rib-shelf and drew a sob. By stomach’s reach, Xie Lian was twisting beneath him, cock fully hard and arching upward, weeping at the crown.

Hua Cheng kissed the crease of one hip, then the other. “Still want me inside you?”

Xie Lian looked bright and bewildered, but managed his fiercest nod.

“Use your words,” Hua Cheng reminded, kissing just beside the base of his cock.

Xie Lian quaked. "Yes. Yes—please, San Lang. I want it."

“Then turn over for me, gege.” Hua Cheng palmed up his thigh. “Let me take care of you.”

Xie Lian melted back into the pillows, carnelian and fever-warm, then mustering his shaky limbs, rolled over belly-down. The towel beneath him was damp and cool, its edge catching awkwardly under one hip. He wriggled to adjust it, then gave up when it fought back. He pressed his cheek to the pillow, tucking and folding his arms beneath it, spine curving in a soft crescent. Sin had wrung him out and yet he watched Hua Cheng from the corner of his eye like he couldn’t miss a frame.

Hua Cheng made a sound at this sight—low, almost pained—and spread Xie Lian open: one hand per cheek, thumbs parting. He had the kind of ass that was round and high and heavy in the hand. Velvet over stone, firm where it counted, but with enough give to make a man greedy.

He stared, jaw tight. *What a fucking waste,* he thought, *using something like this just to sit,* then licked a long, slow stripe from the base of Xie Lian’s balls all the way up to the tight ring of muscle above. He felt Xie Lian jolt, legs kicking once against the bed before going stiff and into a high whine.

“San Lang—!”

Hua Cheng groaned, flattened his tongue and dragged it over the rim in slow laps. He spit, then repeated, slicker now.

The sensation made Xie Lian squirm. Too much and not

enough, filthy and absurd, especially when Hua Cheng let his tongue dip low to trace along his taint.

Xie Lian twitched, writhing. “That tickles—!”

Hua Cheng laughed against his skin, open-mouthed and breath-warm. “Cute.”

Then he got serious. He spread him wider and mouthed over the pucker—sucking, licking, tonguing the tight ring until it gave slightly under the pressure. His tongue prodded insistently, tip pushing past the rim and curling inward. He licked in shallow thrusts, then flattened his tongue again and dragged it upward, letting the muscle flex and roll right over the twitching pucker.

Xie Lian gasped into the pillow, fists clenched in the sheets. His thighs trembled and parted wider on instinct, hips lifting to bare more. He couldn’t seem to stop making noise—thin, strangled things. He jolted whenever Hua Cheng mouthed just beneath his rim and sucked lightly at the taint, tongue dragging in lazy figure-eights. Just as he began to splinter apart, Hua Cheng pulled away with a kiss to the base of his spine and groped blindly at the bedside. A soft snap: the sound of a cap coming off.

“San Lang…” Xie Lian slurred, muffled against linen.

“Shh.” Hua Cheng slicked his fingers with lube. “Just like that, you’re doing incredible.”

He pressed a finger to the fluttering rim of Xie Lian’s hole, still glossy with spit. He circled once, twice—feeling the way the muscle twitched beneath him—then pressed in, just the very tip. The ring of muscle squeezed down hard, and Xie Lian gasped, whole body tightening like it was trying to force the intrusion back out.

“Easy,” Hua Cheng said, voice plush. “You’re okay. I’ve got you.”

He sank to the second knuckle and paused, letting Xie Lian adjust. When Xie Lian mumbled something loose and senseless into

the sheets and wiggled his hips, Hua Cheng took it as permission. He added a second finger in alongside the first. The stretch made Xie Lian suck in a sharp breath.

It was obscene how clearly he could feel them—two thick fingers working inside him, twisting, scissoring, dragging along the delicate lining of nerves. He couldn't tell if he liked it. Every time Hua Cheng twisted his fingers, the stretch bared its teeth—teetering between discomfort and something pleasurable (a kind that stung, that made his eyes water; hurt just enough to feel good.) It made his cock throb where it hung heavy between his legs, leaking freely now.

"That's it," Hua Cheng's voice was bent soft. He leaned over Xie Lian, pressing a kiss between his shoulder blades. "You're doing so fucking well, gege."

Only once had Xie Lian tried to finger himself; it hadn't felt right, like pushing open a door the wrong way. Surely he'd missed something with the angle, wrist bent funny in its fruitless search until it started prickling numb and he gave up. But this was nothing like that. Hua Cheng's fingers moved with confidence, with patience. He dragged them along one wall, then angled in—like feeling around in the dark for the light-switch—and hit it. Something inside Xie Lian lit up.

"San Lang—" he gasped, voice thin. "I—*ah*…"

The switch behind his spine issued a silent hum that made his vision flicker, his consciousness briefly losing its outline. Meanwhile, Hua Cheng's other hand skimmed his belly, fingers splaying low, until they reached the spot where thigh met groin—where Xie Lian's cock drooled precum onto the towel. He dragged a knuckle along the underside and Xie Lian jerked.

"Sensitive," Hua Cheng hummed. "You like being touched like this when you're being opened, huh?"

He thrust down to the third knuckle. He dragged across the spot inside that made Xie Lian's body flinch and seize and then go slack again. He brushed it once, twice—then ground against it, slow

little scrapes of pressure that made Xie Lian want to cry out into the pillow. His cock kicked against his stomach. A fresh bead welled at the tip and Hua Cheng caught it with his thumb, spreading it over the head with a lazy smear.

"*Please*—" Xie Lian whimpered, hips caught in a helpless rhythm between being fucked and stroked, not enough of either. "Please, I—"

"You want more?" Hua Cheng rasped. "Want my cock instead, gege?"

If it felt anything like his fingers, Xie Lian wanted it desperately. He nodded wildly into the pillow-depths.

"Say it."

"I want your cock," Xie Lian choked out. "I want it inside—I want you to fuck me, San Lang, *please*—"

Hua Cheng pulled his fingers free slowly, watching the way Xie Lian's hole clung, twitching and slick with lube. "Turn over for me, baby. Wanna see your face while I fuck you."

Xie Lian trembled, chest heaving. When he rolled supine, his legs instinctively closed, thighs sealed tight. Hua Cheng pushed them apart again with both hands and gave the inside of one a little pinch. He reached for a condom in the bedside drawer, then paused, dangling its foil.

"Want one? I tested clean last week. No pressure."

Xie Lian blinked drunk-slow. "Mm—no. I want San Lang to cum inside me."

Hua Cheng's throat dried up. "Fuck, gege," he breathed. "You're… *fuck*."

He lubed up again—much more than he needed—slicking himself from base to tip. Then he guided the head to Xie Lian's rim and held there, nudging at it while steadying both of them. His

other hand cupped Xie Lian's jaw, thumb stroking the corner of his mouth before tilting his chin up for kisses.

First push was broad pressure and Hua Cheng groaned low in his throat. "You're so—just look at you, taking me…"

Then it turned sharp, a searing sting as the head breached full. Xie Lian hissed, jaw knocking against Hua Cheng's teeth —"Sorry, sorry, I'm so sorry, San Lang"—then clawed at the sheets. He'd hoped it would be more bearable, but it wasn't; it hurt.

It didn't matter that Xie Lian wanted it—his body didn't yet know that. It tried to spit Hua Cheng back out.

"Easy, take a breath. Don't tense."

Xie Lian forced air into his lungs, fluttery and uneven. He could feel every slow, stretching inch. It didn't glide in easy like fingers did; it was new-cut-burn sort of pain licking along his spine just this side of too much.

"It's—it hurts a little—" Xie Lian winced, tears pricking the edges of his eyes.

"I know. You're doing so well for me." Hua Cheng kissed him again. "Does gege want to stop? We can stop."

"No, no… Keep going."

Kisses helped ease the sting, though once their teeth clacked together hard enough to make Xie Lian wince. 'Sorry—sorry,' he mumbled again, lips still chasing.

"Don't apologize," Hua Cheng laughed against his mouth.

He was patient with Xie Lian, almost painfully so, pausing with every inch of his cock he fed in and stroking Xie Lian's own in between; it had softened with the shock of intrusion but steadily returning to half-hard. He mumbled little praises into Xie Lian's ear, each so heartfelt and cajoling.

“You… can keep going.”

“Yeah?” Hua Cheng murmured, brushing damp baby hairs from Xie Lian’s forehead.

Xie Lian nodded, eyes glossy. “Yeah.”

Hua Cheng exhaled, not realizing he too had been holding his breath. He kissed Xie Lian’s jaw, then braced one hand beside his head and rolled his hips forward.

The stretch reopened instantly. Xie Lian made a low, tight sound, like a moan snagged on thorns.

Hua Cheng slid in slow, then slower when Xie Lian started holding his breath again, but worked himself in until his hips met the backs of Xie Lian’s thighs with a soft, shuddery press.

“Fuck.” He dropped his sweat-dampened forehead to Xie Lian’s shoulder. “You’re so fucking tight. Gripping me like you don’t want to let go.”

Xie Lian’s legs shook, toes curling. “It’s so much,” he whined. “You’re so big, San Lang.”

“Yeah?” Hua Cheng murmured, licking into the shell of his ear. “You feel how deep I am? That’s my cock, gege. That thick stretch right here—” His hand pressed low on Xie Lian’s belly, right above his pelvis. “That’s me.”

Xie Lian gasped. His whole body clenched at the new pressure, so full it was almost sickening, curling hot and tight behind his navel. He couldn't keep still. His hips rolled without meaning to, chasing something just past bearable.

“I know, baby. You’re doing so fucking good.” Hua Cheng’s hand slid up his body, fingers splaying across his chest. “Are you okay?”

“Mm—y-yeah.” Xie Lian nodded fast. “It feels… a lot. But good. Good.”

“Tell me if that changes.”

With the second thrust, the stretch gave easier. The third, Xie Lian moaned without realizing. “Oh—San Lang…”

“There?” Hua Cheng rasped. “That spot?”

Xie Lian’s eyes pinched shut.

“Look at me while I fuck you.”

Xie Lian’s eyes fluttered open, glassy, edges red.

Hua Cheng pulled out to the tip and slammed back in, punching the breath from Xie Lian’s lungs. The slapping when their hips met made his face flame. All the sounds were filthy, slick skin meeting skin, lube and spit and precum squelching.

Hua Cheng’s cock drove in on a steady rhythm, puffy rim clinging, grinding over the same angle until it had Xie Lian writhing, hips twisting under him. Xie Lian melted, feeling a pulsing pleasure everywhere from the tips of his fingers to the curl of his toes, the sheered edge twisting every time Hua Cheng fucked back in. At one point, his thigh twitched with an errant muscle spasm—one of those weird nerve firings—which San Lang paused for and waited to pass.

“You like me inside you like this? Fucking you open?”

“Yes,” Xie Lian whimpered, clinging to him. “Yes, San Lang—“ He was close again. He could feel it knotting tight in his belly, hot coils of pressure creeping down his thighs, up his spine. Every nerve was lit and twitching. “I—I can’t—I’m—”

Hua Cheng gripped his thighs hard enough to bruise. “Come for me, baby. I want you to cum while I’m fucking you.” His tongue worked its way into Xie Lian’s mouth.

Xie Lian moaned against his teeth. He clung to Hua Cheng like he was drowning, hips rolling up into every thrust, meeting them with shaky, instinctive movements. The pain was still there—

deep and sore—but it had been swallowed by the sweet, thick, splitting drag of his cock, and he chased it. One hand tangled in the other's hair, gripping at the base of his skull, the other clawing down his back. His thighs locked around his waist, heels digging in, trying to keep him closer, get him deeper. His cock was pinned between their stomachs, leaking messily and bouncing, catching friction along hard abs. He couldn't breathe. Couldn't think. All he could do was feel: the fullness, the heat, the growled praise in his ear.

Bed creaking under the force, Xie Lian came first, a muffled choke between their mouths before he broke off to turn his head, sucking down a ragged lungful of air, head flung back and throat arched. Ribbons of cum spilled across his belly and collar bones. His whole body drew bow-string taut, hips boosting upwards, then relaxed boneless.

The way Xie Lian gripped Hua Cheng—trembling and crying out—yanked him right over the edge too. He thrust twice more before he followed with a low-throated groan, hips curling and stuttering flush against Xie Lian's ass and thighs as he came.

He collapsed forward, catching his weight on his forearms just in time to keep from crushing Xie Lian. Their chests stuck together—sweat-slick and cum-smeared—heartbeat to heartbeat, lungs trying to sync but staccato-screaming. For a while there was only panting: ragged, steam-warped, thick with sex and heat and salt.

Xie Lian blinked up at the ceiling, dazed and blown-out, heart still palpitating somewhere in his throat. His legs had gone numb from being splayed so wide for so long, though his thighs trembled around Hua Cheng's hips, the occasional throttling of aftershocks shivering through him.

"San Lang…"

Hua Cheng grunted, nosing into his hairline. "Mn?"

"You're heavy."

A wheeze of a laugh. “Sorry, gege.” He shifted, kissed the corner of Xie Lian’s mouth, and eased back.

The drag of his cock, still thick and half-hard, slid from Xie Lian’s rim with a squelch. The sensation left Xie Lian gasping, both at the overstimulation and the sudden coolness. He trembled when the head finally slipped free, followed immediately by a slow, warm drip of cum, thick and sticky, sliding down the cleft of his ass in a long, stringy stretch like molten sugar. His ass tried to close but he could feel it only flutter, trying to remember how to shut. Each contraction was syrupy, wet with lube and spit and the sheer mess Hua Cheng had pumped into him.

Hua Cheng watched—entranced—as it oozed out. A string of it clung to the tip of his dick, stretching like a glistening spit-rope of white, eventually giving way and catching on the curve of Xie Lian’s thigh. Another drop slipped free to the sheets.

“Look at that…” Hua Cheng awed. His hand slid over Xie Lian’s cheek, thumb brushing just beside where his cum trickled in a slick line.

Xie Lian made a muffled noise and buried his face in the pillow. “No,” he groaned. “Don’t say anything.”

The ceiling seemed to float, patterns shifting as his vision refocused. It felt as though his skin had been removed, everything exposed, then placed back with slightly different seams.

"Don't move." Hua Cheng dropped a kiss to his temple before disappearing into the bathroom.

Xie Lian couldn't have moved if he tried. His limbs felt disconnected from his body, heavy and useless. He heard water running, then Hua Cheng returned with a warm, damp cloth, and began to clean, starting with his stomach and chest.

"Is this okay?" he asked.

Xie Lian hummed, eyes half-lidded. “Mmhm… yeah. It’s okay.”

Hua Cheng worked slow and careful, pausing once to watch a new trickle of cum ease down the curve of his ass.

“You’re still dripping.”

“Nngh—stop.” Xie Lian’s ears were cherry red. His body kept giving these little jolts, like static, whenever the washcloth passed somewhere tender.

“Sorry, gege,” Hua Cheng said, sounding not sorry at all.

Eventually, he returned to the bathroom, rinsed it, then came back with a fresh towel: dry, thick, warm. He slid it under Xie Lian and began drying him like someone cradling a relic: soft pats, never rubbing too harsh, and once done, laid down beside him. He slung an arm across Xie Lian’s waist and nosed into the curve of his neck. “You’re gonna be sore.”

“Mm.” Xie Lian hummed, already floating. “S’fine. Wait… will I be able to walk tomorrow?”

Hua Cheng snorted. “You’ll whine about it.”

“Will not.”

“You’ll limp and sigh dramatically like a jilted heiress.”

Xie Lian huffed, too tired to mount a proper defense. Hua Cheng chuckled, then slipped out of bed. “Don’t move,” he said, pressing a kiss to Xie Lian’s forehead. “I’ll get us water.”

Xie Lian made a noncommittal noise and flopped deeper into the sheets, which still clung damp to his skin. The pillow was cool though his muscles were wrecked. He dozed in the short moment Hua Cheng was gone.

Then: footsteps. The bed dipped. A cold glass pressed into his palm. “For you, Your Highness.”

Xie Lian squinted one eye open, sat up just enough to sip, then collapsed into Hua Cheng’s chest after setting the glass aside.

Hua Cheng tucked them both under the covers again, this time pulling Xie Lian against him chest-to-back, arm wrapped around his stomach, cheek nuzzled into his shoulder.

After a few minutes of quiet: "San Lang... do you think ghosts get embarrassed?"

"Ghosts?"

"Mm. If they're watching people... like this." Xie Lian gestured vaguely at their naked bodies. "Do you think they blush and cover their eyes, or are they past that?"

Hua Cheng's chest rumbled with laughter. "Is gege worried we've scandalized the spirit realm tonight?"

"Maybe." Xie Lian twisted to see Hua Cheng's face. "What if there's a shy ghost in the corner right now, covering its face but peeking through its fingers?"

"Then that ghost is getting quite the show."

"San Lang!" Xie Lian swatted at him. "I'm being serious."

"Are you?" Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow. "About ghost voyeurs?"

Xie Lian pouted. "I just wonder sometimes about things... death and consciousness and... oh, never mind. It's stupid."

"It's not stupid." Hua Cheng hugged him tight. "If ghosts exist, then I imagine they'd be like people—some would look away respectfully, some would be curious, and some would be perverts who intentionally haunt bedrooms."

Xie Lian giggled. "Do you think they'd get... you know... aroused?"

"Gege!" Hua Cheng feigned shock. "Such scandalous questions."

"I'm just curious," Xie Lian defended, his ears turning pink. "If you don't have a body, how would you... feel things?"

“Maybe they possess people," Hua Cheng suggested, tracing patterns on Xie Lian's stomach. "Or maybe they just remember what it was like."

"That sounds lonely.”

"Mm. Which is why, if I were a ghost, I'd definitely possess you."

"San Lang!"

"What? I'd be a very respectful possessing entity." He kissed the nape of Xie Lian's neck. "I'd only take over during boring meetings. Or when you're alone at night, missing me."

"I'd rather you just stay alive with me, if it's all the same."

"That's the plan.”

Xie Lian yawned. "Do you think ghost doctors still have to do rounds in the afterlife?"

"Is that what keeps you up at night? Worrying about eternal shifts at the ghost hospital?"

"Maybe," Xie Lian mumbled, eyes closing. "I hope not. I'd like at least one lifetime off. I may not have my medical license anymore, but if there is torture in an afterlife, I'd imagine it would be hospital rounds."

"I think you've earned it," Hua Cheng said. "Rest now, gege. No ghost patients tonight."

"Promise?"

"I'll fight them off myself.”

Morning pressed against Xie Lian’s back. He stretched out in bed, feeling for what’d been left: the rim of heat where a body had been. Bread blackened down the hall. Coffee, tamped, split open into drip.

He was sore, predictably. The hips were loudest, then spine. Every part of him had been known too well last night.

Voices drifted in. Hua Cheng's deep tones accompanied by...

Xie Lian sat up, alert before he was conscious. He found the first clothes to hand: Hua Cheng’s shirt, too large, and a pair of drawstring pants cinched tight at the waist. He raked fingers through his hair, coaxed the worst of it down, then forward—limping a little—toward the sound.

"All I'm saying is we've been worried," Feng Xin's voice cut down the hallway. "He doesn't answer his phone, he's not at his apartment—"

"Did it occur to you that he's entitled to his privacy?" Hua Cheng asked.

"When it comes to Xie Lian? No, frankly it didn't," Mu Qing said. "He has a habit of getting into trouble when left unsupervised."

"I'm not a child." Xie Lian stepped into the kitchen.

Three heads turned. Feng Xing: wide-eyed. Mu Qing: assessing. Hua Cheng: smiling fondly.

“Clearly,” Mu Qing said, gaze dragging over the borrowed shirt, the bruises blooming like wisteria up his neck.

Xie Lian’s hand flew to his throat, ears red. “What are you two doing here?”

“What are we—?” Feng Xin sputtered. “What are *you* doing here? We’ve been calling since yesterday and had to ask Shi Qingxuan where you’d be. You missed dinner—”

“Dinner?” Xie Lian blinked.

“The one we’ve had every other Saturday for two years,” Mu Qing said. “The one we fight hospital schedules for.”

"Oh." Xie Lian's face fell. "But… but… I sent a message to the group chat that I wasn’t going to be able to make it.”

He limped off—dignity be damned—and came back clutching his phone. Thumbed through: *message not delivered.*

Mu Qing glanced between him and Hua Cheng, who leaned against the counter like he owned it, not just the lease.

“Clearly, you were occupied,” he said.

“Coffee, gege?” Hua Cheng offered, holding out a mug. One mug.

"Thank you, San Lang.”

"*San Lang?*" Feng Xin repeated. His eyebrows made a bid for freedom. “Since when do you call Dr. Hua *San Lang*?”

"That's really not—"

"Since we started dating," Hua Cheng supplied. "Which, incidentally, is why he missed dinner."

Mu Qing exhaled through his nose and rubbed his brow.

“Dating,” Feng Xin managed.

“Yes.” Xie Lian straightened with what grace he had left. “Is that a problem?”

“No,” Feng Xin said quickly. Then, to Hua Cheng, “Maybe. Depends what your intentions are.”

“My intentions,” Hua Cheng said, “are between me and Xie Lian. But they are honorable.”

Mu Qing snorted. “Right. That’s why he’s wearing your clothes and has a hickey big enough to chart on a map.”

“Mu Qing!” Xie Lian yelped.

“I’m just stating facts.” Arms crossed now. “We don’t care who you’re sleeping with—”

“We care a little,” Feng Xin said.

"—but you could have at least made sure your text went through to let us know you weren't lying dead in a ditch somewhere."

“I should have. I’m sorry.”

Silence settled, thick and awkward. The coffee maker hissed in finishing its work.

“Well,” Feng Xin said, clapping his hands. “You’re alive. That’s what counts.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Xie Lian said, quiet.

“Oh, we do,” Mu Qing said flatly.

Hua Cheng crossed his arms. "You're eager to leave now, but you had no problem barging in without warning to interrogate Xie Lian about his whereabouts."

"We were concerned," Feng Xin defended.

"Funny," Hua Cheng said. "I don't recall Xie Lian showing up at your place unannounced demanding to know about that nurse tech you've been seeing."

"That's—how did you—"

"Hospital gossip," Mu Qing muttered, avoiding everyone's eyes.

"Jian Lan?" Xie Lian asked. "From Labor and Delivery?"

"We just got coffee," Feng Xin amended. "It's nothing serious."

"Three times," Mu Qing corrected, then looked away when everyone turned to him. "What?"

"How do you know this?" Feng Xin demanded.

"I pay attention. Unlike some people."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Mu Qing checked his watch. "We should go."

"Wait," Feng Xin said, suddenly confused. "Are you—do you have a problem with me seeing Jian Lan?"

"Date whoever you want. I couldn't care less."

"Maybe we should all take a breath," Xie Lian suggested.

"No need," Mu Qing said, already heading for the door. "We're leaving."

"Mu Qing—" Feng Xin started, but was cut off by Xie Lian's phone ringing.

He fumbled for it, checked the screen. "It's Shi Qingxuan." He answered, putting it on speaker. "Hello?"

"Oh good, you're alive!" Shi Qingxuan's voice blared. "Thought maybe Hua Cheng had you tied up somewhere. No judgment!"

Xie Lian's face flamed red as Hua Cheng smirked.

"Anyway," Shi Qingxuan continued, "just checking if Feng Xin and Mu Qing found you. They were big mad about dinner."

"They're here…"

"Skrrt! Did I interrupt something? Sounds mad tense."

"No, they were just leaving," Hua Cheng said.

"Oh! Wait, is Feng Xin there too? Tell him Jian Lan was asking about him in the cafeteria. Absolute W for him."

Feng Xin looked both pleased and embarrassed by this, while Mu Qing's jaw clenched so hard Xie Lian could almost hear teeth grinding.

"We'll, uh, let him know," Xie Lian said hastily. "Talk later, Qingxuan."

"Congratulations," Mu Qing said. "Sounds like things are getting serious."

"It was coffee."

"Three times," Mu Qing repeated, moving toward the door. "I need to go."

"Mu Qing—" Feng Xin looked torn, but nodded. "I should go too. Sorry for... all this."

When they were both gone, Xie Lian sagged against Hua Cheng, who wrapped an arm around his waist.

"That was..."

"Fascinating."

"I was going to say 'uncomfortable.'"

"That too." Hua Cheng pressed a kiss to Xie Lian's temple. "How long has that been going on?"

"Years," Xie Lian sighed. "They've been dancing around each other since we left China. Neither one will admit it."

"And yet they have no problem prying into your love life."

"About that," Xie Lian said, turning in Hua Cheng's arms. "Are we...? I mean, is this...?"

"Yes, gege. Unless you'd rather not."

"No!" Xie Lian said quickly. "I mean, yes. I want to be. With you."

"Good," Hua Cheng murmured, pulling him closer.

Their kiss was sweet, unhurried as morning feet to the front door until Xie Lian's phone buzzed again. He groaned, dropping his forehead to Hua Cheng's chest.

"If that's Shi Qingxuan asking for details..."

"Ignore it," Hua Cheng slid his hands low. "We have more important things to do."

Xie Lian gasped as Hua Cheng lifted him, carrying him back toward the bedroom.

"Wait," Xie Lian said, latching his legs around Hua Cheng's waist. "What if it's important?"

"Then he'll call back," Hua Cheng reasoned, nudging the bedroom door open with his foot. "Feng Xin and Mu Qing can sort out their own mess for a change."

***

Xie Lian made his rounds through the cardiothoracic surgery wing, mopping around IV poles and monitoring equipment while patients dozed.

He was just finishing the last room when he spotted Pei Ming entering the medication storage room. Curious, he wheeled his cart closer, watching through the half-open door as the surgeon pocketed something from the antibiotic shelf.

"Good morning, Dr. Pei," Xie Lian sing-songed.

Pei Ming startled, nearly dropping the vial. "Ah, Xie Lian! Didn't see you there."

"Sorry if I surprised you." Xie Lian nodded toward the stuffed pocket. "Don't forget to check that out in the system."

"Of course, of course." Pei Ming flashed his smile—the one that had half the nursing staff swooning. "Just in a rush. Big case coming up."

"Anything interesting?"

"Triple bypass. Nothing too exciting." Pei Ming was already backing toward the door. "Gotta run. Patients to see, hearts to fix."

Something about his hasty exit struck Xie Lian as odd, but he shrugged it off. Surgeons were always in a hurry.

During lunch, Xie Lian was scrolling through his phone when he noticed messages pouring in from the group chat—mostly complaints about shift schedules and cafeteria food. After hesitating a moment, he decided to send a polite reminder to Pei Ming. It was probably nothing, but hospital regulations about medication tracking were strict.

Xie Lian [12:43 PM]

Dr. Pei, I hope I'm not overstepping, but did you remember to check out those antibiotics from this morning? I just thought I'd remind you since you looked busy, if you haven't already.

There was a long pause in the chat before a flurry of responses appeared:

Shi Qingxuan [12:46 PM]

👀 👀 👀

Feng Xin [12:46 PM]

What antibiotics? You don't have any surgical patients on antibiotics right now, Pei.

Pei Ming [12:47 PM]

It's for a private patient matter. HIPPA, you know.

Mu Qing [12:47 PM]

It's "HIPAA." And it doesn't apply if there's no patient.

Shi Qingxuan [12:48 PM]

SKRRRT the tea is SCALDING

Pei Ming [12:49 PM]

I'm a surgeon. I have patients.

Hua Cheng [12:49 PM]

Your last three surgical cases were all elective procedures with no post-op antibiotic protocols ordered. I checked.

Xie Lian stared at his phone, mortified.

Xie Lian [12:50 PM]

I apologize if I've caused any trouble. I was just trying to be helpful.

Xuan Ji [12:51 PM]

Speaking of those antibiotics, I saw you taking doxycycline from the shelf. That's odd for cardiac cases, isn't it?

Shi Qingxuan [12:51 PM]

DOXYCYCLINE?? GAGGED. THE CLAP STRIKES AGAIN!

Pei Ming [12:52 PM]

It is NOT the clap!

Shi Qingxuan [12:52 PM]

CAUGHT IN 4K YOU RIZZLER

Ling Wen [12:53 PM]

As hospital administrator, I feel compelled to remind everyone that misappropriation of hospital medication is grounds for disciplinary action. Also, this conversation is highly unprofessional.

Shi Qingxuan [12:53 PM]

big yikes

Pei Ming [12:54 PM]

You all are just jealous of my active social life.

He Xuan [12:54 PM]

We're "jealous" of chlamydia?

Pei Ming [12:55 PM]

It could be a UTI.

Hua Cheng [12:55 PM]

From a toilet seat, I'm sure.

Xie Lian's phone buzzed with a private message.

San Lang [12:56 PM]

Don't worry about Pei Ming. This isn't the first time he's helped himself to the hospital pharmacy for his "extracurricular activities."

Xie Lian [12:57 PM]

I didn't mean to embarrass him. I was just reminding him about protocol.

San Lang [12:57 PM]

Your kindness is wasted on him. He's been doing this for years—taking antibiotics prophylactically because he refuses to use protection.

Xie Lian [12:58 PM]

Oh.

Back in the group chat, things were getting worse:

Feng Xin [12:58 PM]

This is why we can't have good antibiotics. Antibiotic resistance is a real problem!

Shi Qingxuan [12:59 PM]

nah, he tweakin

Mu Qing [12:59 PM]

Can we please maintain some semblance of professionalism?

Pei Ming [1:00 PM]

Says the man who once threw a crossword puzzle at a resident for filling it out in pen.

Mu Qing [1:00 PM]

That was justified.

Ling Wen [1:01 PM]

As amusing as this is, I must insist we conclude this conversation. Dr. Pei Ming, my office, 8 AM tomorrow.

Pei Ming [1:01 PM]

I have surgeries scheduled.

Ling Wen [1:02 PM]

Not anymore.

Shi Qingxuan [1:02 PM]

SKILL ISSUE

The chat fell silent after that. Xie Lian felt a pang of guilt for inadvertently causing trouble.

His phone buzzed again with a private message:

San Lang [1:11 PM]

I like having a boyfriend with integrity. Dinner at my place tonight?

Xie Lian smiled at the word "boyfriend." It still felt new, exciting.

Xie Lian [1:11 PM]

Dinner sounds perfect.

***

Afternoon brought a brief lull in the trauma unit. Hua Cheng was updating charts at the nurse's station when Yin Yu approached with a tablet in hand.

"Insurance approved an MRI for this patient, Dr. Hua," Yin Yu reported, sliding the tablet across the counter.

Hua Cheng paused, one eyebrow raised. The patient in question—a 45-year-old with persistent shoulder pain following a motorcycle accident—had been denied imaging three times.

"That... was suspiciously easy," Hua Cheng said, studying the approval notice. "What changed?"

Yin Yu winced, shifting uncomfortably. "It's a drive-by MRI. They said..." he checked his tablet, "we should call 1-800 and ask

for Texaco Mike. He built one in the back of his car wash."

Hua Cheng stared at him. "A drive-by MRI."

"Yes, sir."

"At a car wash."

"Yes, sir."

"Run by someone called Texaco Mike."

"That's what they said, sir. The insurance representative seemed very enthusiastic about their new 'cost-effective imaging network.'"

Hua Cheng pinched the bridge of his nose. "And where exactly is this car wash?"

"About forty miles outside the city. The approval says ‘patient needs to bring their own towel.’"

***

Glints of light caught on the kitchen counters as Hua Cheng darted about, chopping and sizzling a domestic soundtrack, but anxiety gnawed at Xie Lian's insides until he felt like nothing but a spitty flesh globule. He was thinking about Director Jun’s USB.

"I'm thinking spicy eggplant," Hua Cheng called over his shoulder. "That place we passed had beautiful Japanese eggplants."

"Sounds perfect," Xie Lian replied, hovering in the archway between kitchen and living room. "Do you need help?"

Hua Cheng shook his head. "I've got it under control. Why don't you relax? You seem... tense."

Xie Lian managed a weak smile. "Do I?"

"A little." Hua Cheng wiped his hands on a kitchen towel and

kissed Xie Lian's forehead. "Whatever's bothering you, you can tell me."

"I just have some work to look over."

"Work?"

"Administrative stuff. From Director Jun."

Hua Cheng frowned but kept his thoughts to himself. "Take your time. Dinner won't be ready for at least thirty minutes."

Xie Lian gathered a laptop from his bag and settled cross-legged on the couch. He examined the USB, turning over its cold, innocuous black plastic. Laptop fans whirring the screen to life, he fumbled with the USB drive, trying to insert it into the port. It wouldn't go in. He flipped it upside down and tried again. Still no luck. He rotated it once more, trying a third orientation before finally returning to the first position he'd attempted—which, of course, worked perfectly this time.

A window popped up, displaying a single folder labeled "Financial Records - Confidential." Inside were dozens of spreadsheets and PDFs, organized by department and fiscal quarter. Xie Lian clicked on one labeled "Cardiothoracic - Q2."

At first glance, nothing amiss. Equipment costs, medication expenses, salary allocations—all standard hospital budget items. But as he compared the spreadsheets side by side, discrepancies emerged. Certain expenses were duplicated across departments, invoices for equipment that couldn't possibly be used by multiple specialties. Surgical supplies billed to Ophthalmology. Anesthesia drugs charged to Janitorial Services. Money siphoned off in small enough increments to avoid immediate detection but large enough to add up to significant amounts over time.

Hua Cheng hummed as he cooked, and Xie Lian's stomach turned. The normalcy of it—dinner being prepared while he sat with evidence of fraud—so surreal.

Jun Wu slithered into his consciousness: *Your past has a way*

of following you, doesn't it? The newspaper article placed on the desk. Wuhan. Memories of panic, of blame. Even today, Jun Wu had passed him in the hallway and mentioned, so offhandedly, how fortunate Tonglu was to have Dr. Hua, such a skilled surgeon with such a promising future. The director had never directly threatened him or Hua Cheng, never spoken the word ‘blackmail,’ but Xie Lian knew exactly what he intended.

He clicked through more files, finding patterns across all departments. By the time he'd examined only half the documents, a clear picture had emerged: Jun Wu had been siphoning money from the hospital for years on end, possibly since he first took the position. The amount had to be in the millions by now. And he wanted Xie Lian to help him continue. He had *ensured* Xie Lian would help him continue.

"How's the administrative work going?"

Xie Lian startled, laptop nearly taking flight. "Fine. Just... reviewing some numbers."

Hua Cheng reduced the heat on the pan. The windowpane caught his reflection—crimson sweater, dark hair loose around his shoulders, the hollow of his missing eye barely visible from this angle.

When he turned, Xie Lian had tucked the laptop away and was sitting with his knees drawn to his chest, arms wrapped around them. A man folded into himself, making himself smaller. Hua Cheng had seen this posture in field hospitals, in waiting rooms—the body's instinct to protect vital organs when under threat.

"Is the administrative work troubling you?"

Xie Lian looked up, swallowed. "Just complicated. Nothing I can't handle."

Hua Cheng sat on the coffee table, bumping their knees together. "Does gege want to talk about it?”

“Not right now.” Xie Lian smiled, thin and brittle.

"Whatever gege wants." Hua Cheng took Xie Lian's cold hands, warming them from wan to cherry. "But I'm here if you change your mind."

Pan hissing, city humming, the apartment smelled of ginger-sweat and searing oil. Sirens wailed, faded. The refrigerator's compressor kicked on with a shudder that traveled through the floorboards and into Xie Lian's heels. He looked down at their joined hands and studied the calluses on Hua Cheng's fingers.

"Why don't you like Director Jun?"

Hua Cheng's eyebrow rose. "What makes you think I don't like him?"

"I've seen how you are around him. San Lang, don’t tease me.”

"It's nothing specific. Just instinct."

"Your instincts are usually good."

"When I first started at Tonglu, I did some background research on Jun Wu. Standard practice when you're working for someone new." Hua Cheng shrugged. "For a hospital director with his supposed credentials, there was remarkably little information available. A few carefully worded press releases, a sanitized bio on the hospital website. Nothing substantial."

"That bothered you."

"It raised questions." Hua Cheng's thumb traced circles on Xie Lian's palm.

"Maybe he's just private."

"Maybe." Hua Cheng didn't sound convinced. “Everyone has secrets, gege. The question is whether those secrets are harmless or not.”

The pan hissed, neglected garlic beginning to burn. Hua

Cheng squeezed Xie Lian's hands once before standing and moving back to the kitchen. "Be careful what you ask Jun Wu. Men like him rarely give straight answers to anything."

Xie Lian nodded, letting the subject drop. He watched Hua Cheng attend to their dinner, tossing blackened garlic and started fresh. How many things had this man rebuilt from ruin? How many times started over?

"Can I help?"

"You can slice the scallions." Hua Cheng nudged a small cutting board toward him. "Thin as you can manage."

Xie Lian took up position at the counter, shoulder to shoulder, managing thin enough slices, if not quite as elegant as Hua Cheng might have produced.

"I spoke with Yin Yu today," Hua Cheng said. "About a patient's insurance approval for an MRI."

"Oh?"

"Mm. Apparently we're meant to send them to a car wash. Run by someone called Texaco Mike."

Xie Lian's knife slipped, nearly catching his finger. "A what?"

"A drive-by MRI." Hua Cheng smiled through the corners of his eyes. He steadied hand Xie Lian's on the knife. "Careful. I'd rather not stitch you up tonight."

Xie Lian moved to set the table "Did I tell you about Lang Qianqiu and Shi Wudu's argument today over OR scheduling?"

"The ophthalmologist and the plastic surgeon? Strange pairing."

"Lang Qianqiu actually left his office to perform a procedure, but Shi Wudu had already taken the OR for a rhinoplasty."

"Lang Qianqiu saw patients in person? The world is full of wonders. And what was so important that the esteemed Dr. Lang would grace the OR with his presence?" Hua Cheng transferred the eggplant to a shallow serving dish.

"His patient had a retinal detachment."

"And Shi Wudu's?"

"An influencer whose livelihood depended on her appearance. At least, that's what Shi Wudu claimed."

Hua Cheng snorted, bringing the food to the table. "Let me guess. Shi Wudu won."

"Of course." Xie Lian took his seat, waiting for Hua Cheng to join him. "But Ling Wen was watching the whole exchange while taking notes."

"She does that a lot," Hua Cheng observed, settling opposite.

"Do you think she's building cases against people?"

"Ling Wen plays her own game." Hua Cheng gestured for Xie Lian to start eating. "But she's not malicious, just strategic."

Xie Lian nodded, picking up his chopsticks. The eggplant was perfect—soft but not mushy, spicy with a hint of sweetness, and the knot of anxiety in his stomach loosened enough for it to go down.

Dinner was eaten in fragile peace. Chopsticks clattered against bowls, lights winked on in neighboring buildings.

"I was thinking," Hua Cheng said, "we could watch a movie tonight. If you're not too tired."

"A movie?" Xie Lian looked up. "That sounds nice. But I should warn you, I have a bad habit of falling asleep during films."

"Then you'll fall asleep and I'll carry you to bed afterward."

"You make everything sound so simple.”

"Some things are." Hua Cheng held his eyes. "Not everything needs to be complicated."

Not like hospital politics, Xie Lian thought. Not like Jun Wu's schemes and threats. Not like the USB drive still burning a hole in his laptop bag.

"You're right," he said aloud. "A movie sounds perfect."

Later, dishes washed and put away, they settled on the couch. Hua Cheng dimmed the lights to a gentle glow, just enough for them to navigate back to the kitchen if needed. He found an old film, something about a journey west. The opening credits hummed through the apartment's speakers as Xie Lian sank into the couch.

A blanket appeared in Hua Cheng's hands, deep maroon and soft. He draped it over their legs as Xie Lian curled into his side. The blanket smelled of fabric softener, of San Lang. On the coffee table, two mugs of jasmine tea released thin ribbons of satin steam. Hua Cheng's fingers threaded through Xie Lian's hair, his other arm wrapped around Xie Lian's shoulders.

The film began: a monk and his disciples faced supernatural trials. Xie Lian watched through half-lidded eyes, more aware of how Hua Cheng's chest rose and fell beneath his cheek than the film. The tea too hot to drink yet. The blanket tucked around his toes. Hua Cheng's heartbeat marking time in his ear.

"Are you comfortable?" Hua Cheng whispered, his lips brushing Xie Lian's temple.

Xie Lian nodded, nuzzling closer.

Hua Cheng's fingers traced idle patterns on his arm: figure eights, spirals, nonsense shapes that left goosebumps. The television painted their faces. Ten minutes in, Hua Cheng reached for his tea, fingers tapping the mug's handle before he took a sip, swallow audible, the gentle click in his throat so close to Xie Lian's ear.

"Tea?" He offered his mug to Xie Lian.

Xie Lian took a sip, their fingers overlapping on the warm ceramic. The tea tasted sweeter this way, shared from Hua Cheng's lips to his own.

On screen, a monkey king battled demons, movements blurring into golden light. Hua Cheng's thumb traced Xie Lian's lower lip, catching a dribble of tea. His eye remained on the film, but his attention was divided—Xie Lian could hear it in the acceleration of his heartbeat.

A motorcycle engine revved outside the building. The sound of a door closing in the hallway.

Hua Cheng's sock-clad foot nudged Xie Lian's beneath the blanket. He hooked his ankle around it. Trapped it. The film played on. Hua Cheng's hand moved from Xie Lian's hair to his neck, thumb brushing the skin below his ear, waking nerves that had begun to drift toward sleep into shivers.

"Cold?" Hua Cheng murmured

"No," Xie Lian whispered. "Just you."

His lips pressed against Xie Lian’s hairline, corner of the eye, bridge of the nose—small, searching kisses that asked nothing. A stray eyelash had fallen onto Hua Cheng's cheek; Xie Lian reached up to brush it away. He turned his face into the palm, pressed his lips to it. Xie Lian tilted upward, caught Hua Cheng's mouth with his own, sweet and chaste, before they both returned their attention to the screen.

Xie Lian's consciousness began to drift. He fought it for a while, wanting to preserve this feeling—Hua Cheng's arm around him, the rise and fall of his chest. His last thought before surrendering to sleep was that he'd been right about falling asleep during movies.

Orgasm aftershocks kicked through Xie Lian's thighs and belly. Fucked hazy, all he could offer were weak, pleading rolls of his hips and thin whimpers. Thighs slapped his bottom, rut-drunk thrusts hitching and stuttering as Hua Cheng came.

"*Fuck,*" he rasped into Xie Lian's mouth. He couldn't thrust, already buried to the root, but his hips ground in slow jerks, chasing the spill and screwing it deep.

Their mouths worked shaky against one another, all breath and slip and spit-snap. A soft bite to his lip and Hua Cheng's hips curled forward like the nerve lived lower. Xie Lian shuddered. Too much, too much. Nerves shaking loose.

His consciousness arrived back to his body in liquored pulses. Each sensation registered separately: heavy limbs; sweat cooling along his temples and throat; his heart slowing, which had moments ago threatened to break through his chest. He was aware, with a clarity that felt almost hallucinatory, of every point their bodies touched. Hua Cheng's upper lip tasted of salt. Of ocean crossings. Xie Lian ran his tongue over it, not thinking, and noticed a sweat drop wobbling at the tip of Hua Cheng's nose.

He laughed, breath-born as the trembles in his chest. The droplet slipped free and caught on Hua Cheng's lip. He tasted that, too.

Suddenly, his stomach gurgled. Hua Cheng froze for a millisecond before collapsing into his shoulder with laughter. The shake of it traveled through Xie Lian's chest, warming him from the inside.

"Sorry," he said, mortified even as he, too, began laughing. "That was—"

"Perfect," Hua Cheng finished. He tipped forward, pressing them into the mattress. "Perfect timing. Very demure, very mindful."

Xie Lian groaned at the borrowed slang. "Don't you start with

that too."

"What?" Hua Cheng lifted his head, all teeth and shine. "I think it's giving... authenticity."

"It's giving digestion," Xie Lian corrected.

And then they were laughing again, laughing until it was nothing but sun low in the belly.

The air conditioner kicked on. Cold threaded across Xie Lian's skin, made him prickle: chest, thighs, the back of knees. Hua Cheng eased himself free and the stretch gave way all at once, chill fizzing against the open heat inside him, tingles sharpest along the ring of stretched muscle. Cum, syrup-thick, oozed out. It stung against overworked nerves, slipping down the curve of his ass and through the split. He whined, lifted his hips like he could still hold it if he moved fast enough.

"Oh? Does gege want it back?"

Xie Lian bit down on his lip. He nodded, eyes shining like he hadn't blinked since the air left him.

Hua Cheng's hand smoothed down his side. He curled close again, voice folding heat into the tender crook just past Xie Lian's ear. "Say it, let me hear you."

"San Lang, I need more…"

"More?"

Xie Lian's breath caught on a nod.

"But I just gave it to you."

"I know," he whispered. "But it's… it's slipping out…"

"You like feeling me in you after? Want me to stuff you full all over again—make it stay this time?"

“Mmh—ah!”

Hua Cheng nipped his earlobe. “Gege’s greedy.”

How could Xie Lian not be? Knowing San Lang had cum inside him, that he’d been messed up from the inside. It felt good to be used and not discarded. Held down. Held open. “It’s like…” He wiggled his hips. “I can still feel you.”

Hua Cheng cursed and flipped them over. Xie Lian’s knees cracked as he landed in a straddle.

"I'm not even old," he said as though pleading with time. Then a cramp, thigh muscle plicating. “Hang on, charley horse," he grunted, stretching it.

“No.” Hua Cheng laughed, smoothing his legs. “You’re not.”

Beneath, Xie Lian felt it: the soft, thick press of San Lang’s cock, half-hard at most, more heat than form. Half-hard dicks always felt strange, even his own. Heavy and slack, a bit squishy. Like a half-filled wineskin, he thought. He ground against it, slicking its length with the mess of cum leaking from his ass, head catching beneath his tailbone. His own cock was swelling too, foreskin half-drawn back, snug and glistening. He wanted to hide it, shelter it behind his palms.

Hua Cheng hissed, trying not to boost his hips. “Fuck, gege —”

Xie Lian’s rim snagged on the half-hard tip. He whined, hips twitching like maybe—*maybe*—he could work it back in this way. He was loose enough, but Hua Cheng wasn’t hard enough.

He whimpered, frustrated. “Come on—”

Hua Cheng swore under his breath. “Okay. Okay, hang on.” He stroked himself while rutting into the cleft of Xie Lian’s ass. He was hard again in no time, iron-thick in his hand to the point it hurt and his lower back muscles pulled tight. Lining up by feel alone, he sank in with a squelch.

“Nnh—mmh—*hahh*—” Xie Lian’s head fell back like a flower too heavy for its stem.

Hua Cheng groaned. “You feel nice and full?”

Xie Lian nodded, nodded again. “Mmh—*mhm*. San Lang… move.”

Hua Cheng smiled, fox-cheeky. “Gege has to do it.”

Xie Lian blinked, cheeks flushed like pink-lady apples, glossy and sweet. “Oh.” He lifted his hips and sank down. The angle was off; the slide too fast, too sharp. He couldn’t catch the rhythm, couldn’t perform, and San Lang was watching him.

“I—I’m doing it wrong.”

“No, you’re doing perfect.” Hua Cheng rocked up to demonstrate. “Look at that. That tight little ass taking all of me.”

Xie Lian moaned, punched-out. He dropped his forehead to Hua Cheng’s shoulder and tried again.

“You’re doing so good,” Hua Cheng said. “So pretty like this. My perfect little—”

Smack!

Xie Lian jolted. Hua Cheng’s palm cracked across one cheek, heat bursting ripe from the sting.

“A-ah!”

“Keep going.” He soothed the hand print. “Stop and I’ll spank you.”

Up again. Down. Xie Lian’s thighs trembled, nerves arcing electric blue. His rhythm evened out, somewhere between bounce and press. One motion to take, the next to feel. He moved on instinct, hips stuttering through patterns that had nothing to do with thought and everything to do with what pleased him and

hopefully San Lang too.

But his thighs, god, they burned. He wasn't unfit. Less defined than before, maybe. Stress had a way of pushing everything else in life aside. He hadn't practiced wushu in weeks? Months? He couldn't remember. Maybe that was why he was panting like he was under siege. The movements grew sloppier, more pressure than lift, and—

Smack!

Another slap to the opposite cheek, shock springing up his spine.

“San Lang!” he whined.

Hua Cheng cupped the heat. “Is gege tired? You need me to take over?”

Xie Lian nodded, vigorous and tear-bright. “Uh-huh—mhm—please—”

Hua Cheng gripped Xie Lian’s thighs and bounced him on his cock. Leftover cum from the first round leaked out and Hua Cheng screwed it back in until Xie Lian was nothing but a ragdoll, his cock slapping against his stomach with wet *thup thup thup* sounds.

“You want me to cum in that pretty ass, gege?”

“Yes—*yes*,” Xie Lian sobbed, bracing against Hua Cheng’s chest. He couldn’t hold himself up, spine curling, fingers scrabbling. Every movement blurred into the next. “Ah—nnh—hah—uh—I—San Lang—I—ahh—Too much.”

“You can.” Hua Cheng pistoned his hips. “You’re gonna cum again for me. Right, gege?”

“San Lang!”

Thrown into orgasm, he spilled over his stomach, over Hua Cheng’s chest, sweet pleasure pouring out in a cathartic, sweeping

wave. Even the too-close edge of discomfort frothed into dizzy relief. He gasped and flexed his toes, Hua Cheng fucking into him with desperate rhythm. Balls slapped wet and heavy against the sore swell of his ass.

"San—*San Lang—ah*—"

Hua Cheng crushed their chests together, both arms wrapped tight like he could fuse them that way. His hips bucked up, a cinch of muscle wrung from the base of his spine as he came, breath slack-jacked and hitching. "You—fuck—can't believe I get to—get to do this to you—"

The bed was a wreck: sheets twisted, duvet kicked halfway to the floor, pillows crushed between heaving bodies and headboard. Hua Cheng tried to ease him off to catch breath but Xie Lian shook his head. "Not yet. Feels good… Just wanna keep you there longer…"

He felt loosened, hush to hum, San Lang a reef to cling to through raw-knuckled riptides. The ache made a space inside him and rung him clean.

"You like keeping it in?" Hua Cheng nosed at his baby hairs, pulled back an inch, then slid home to feel the squeeze. "Does gege like being stuffed full?"

Xie Lian pinched him with his thighs. "*Ah*—mhmm." Nod after nod.

Hua Cheng smoothed the shivers down his back, thumbed the sweat puddle dimples above his butt. "There's my good gege," voice thick and fond. "Made such pretty sounds for me."

He sniffed hard—wet and gurgly, nose half-clogged. "Ugh," he muttered, wiping his face against Xie Lian's shoulder like that'd help. "My sinuses."

Xie Lian huffed a laugh.

Their stomachs peeled apart, fluid-tacky. Hua Cheng pulled

out, a spit-rope of cum stretching from flushed tip to hole. He eased Xie Lian supine with both hands. “Easy… let me take you down slow.”

Xie Lian whined and fisted the sheets. His hole slackened, then caught tight again, still shaped to hold.

Hua Cheng stared like a man possessed. “Gege…” He smudged his cheek against the inside of Xie Lian’s juddering knee and let it rest there.

Cum slid down the line of his ass. Hua Cheng daubed it with his thumb, nudged it back in, played with the soft give. “So open.” He pinched Xie Lian’s chin and licked under his tongue, bumping the tight band of tissue tethering it. They hummed and settled against one another’s mouth. There was nothing behind Xie Lian's eyes but afterglow.

***

NOT EDITED ABOVE

The hospital cafeteria was surprisingly quiet for lunch. Xie Lian sat at a corner table, working through a container of noodles Hua Cheng had prepared for him. He was so focused on not spilling sauce on his scrubs that he didn't notice Shi Qingxuan sliding into the seat across from him.

"What in the wattpad is this?" Shi Qingxuan gestured at Xie Lian's lunch. "Did you actually bring a homemade lunch? With like, vegetables?"

Xie Lian looked up, chopsticks paused midair. "Good afternoon to you too, Qingxuan."

"Don't 'good afternoon' me when you're sitting here with," Shi Qingxuan leaned forward to inspect, "hand-cut noodles? Girl, is that braised beef? Did Hua Cheng make this?"

"He did. He says hospital food lacks proper nutrition."

"No cap! This man is literally cooking you gourmet lunches?" Shi Qingxuan slumped back. "I can't even get He Xuan to share his vending machine chips."

"San Lang enjoys cooking."

"San Lang." Shi Qingxuan drew out the syllables. "The man who made an intern cry for forgetting to restock trauma kits is now your personal chef. I'm gagged."

"He's not—"

"Oh please." Shi Qingxuan waved. "The man is obsessed with you. Do you know he threatened to personally remove Qi Rong's remaining organs when he saw him lurking near the hospital's front entrance yesterday?"

Xie Lian choked on his noodles. "He did what?"

"Don't worry, he was very professional about it." Shi Qingxuan took a long sip from his pink Stanley. "It's giving simp king, honestly, and I'm here for it. That man would burn this hospital to the ground if you asked him to."

"I would never ask for that."

"That's beside the point, pookie. The point is, Hua Cheng has gone full simp mode."

Xie Lian blinked. "Simp mode?"

"Mmhmm. Absolute simp behavior. The way he looks at you like you invented oxygen? Peak simping."

"I... don't know what that means."

"You seriously don't know what a simp is?"

Xie Lian shook his head.

"Oh, too pure. I can't corrupt you. Hua Cheng would actually murder me." Shi Qingxuan stood, straightening his colorful top. "Anyway, gotta bounce. He Xuan texted that he just got a fascinating corpse in pathology, and I want to see if I can make him smile before my afternoon appointments."

"Good luck with that," Xie Lian said sincerely. Alone, he pulled out his phone.

Xie Lian [1:23 PM]

Do you know what "simp" is?

San Lang [1:23 PM]

Why do you ask?

Xie Lian [1:24 PM]

Shi Qingxuan said you're a "simp king" for me. Is that bad?

There was a long pause.

San Lang [1:26 PM]

It's not bad. It just means I'm devoted to you.

Xie Lian [1:26 PM]

Oh! That's sweet then.

San Lang [1:27 PM]

Shi Qingxuan has a way with words.

Xie Lian [1:27 PM]

He also said you threatened Qi Rong yesterday?

Another pause.

San Lang [1:28 PM]

I reminded him of hospital policy regarding banned individuals.

Xie Lian [1:28 PM]

With threats of bodily harm?

San Lang [1:29 PM]

I was diplomatic.

Xie Lian [1:29 PM]

San Lang.

San Lang [1:30 PM]

He was loitering near your work area. I took appropriate action.

Xie Lian [1:31 PM]

Thank you for looking out for me. But no more threats, please?

San Lang [1:31 PM]

As you wish, gege.

Xie Lian [1:32 PM]

The food you packed was delicious, by the way.

San Lang [1:32 PM]

I'm glad. I'll make more if gege wants.

Xie Lian [1:33 PM]

You don't have to cook for me every day.

San Lang [1:33 PM]

I want to.

Xie Lian was still smiling when his phone buzzed with a new message in the group chat:

Shi Qingxuan [1:34 PM]

GAGGED. Just walked past Trauma and Hua Cheng is SMILING at his phone. The simulation is glitching. This is not a drill.

***

Shoulders tall and back, Jun Wu looked the part of an automaton, cogs in his arm clicking tick-tick-tick as he smoothed back the oil slick of hair fallen loose from its pomade. An entire hospital of antiseptic, and it was his office that smelled the most sterile.

“Have you decided, then?” Jun Wu asked.

Xie Lian slid the USB drive across the desk and scowled. “Do I have a choice?”

Jun Wu smiled back. Surely not, he must be saying. "There are always choices, Dr. Xie.”

What had he done, Xie Lian wondered, to be picked out? Was this his compensation owed for every time Jun Wu looked past the havoc his bad luck brought the hospital? Or had he attracted attention some other way? He supposed, eying the USB, that it no longer mattered.

It was almost funny. Some sort of curse even, one where his life would be undone over and over no matter how hard he fought to keep its particle board walls together. First in Wuhan, his career disintegrated by political expedience; then in America, where his credentials had been rendered meaningless by bureaucracy and suspicion; and now here, in this office, with its smell of furniture

polish and expensive cologne.

"The choice you're offering isn't a choice at all," Xie Lian said. "Either I help you steal from the hospital, or you expose me as what? The man responsible for thousands of deaths? We both know that narrative is false."

"Truth is largely irrelevant in matters of public opinion," Jun Wu adjusted his shirt cuffs. "Whether you were scapegoated or genuinely negligent matters far less than the fact certain officials have already testified to your incompetence."

"And if I agree? Does this arrangement have an endpoint?"

Jun Wu leaned back in his chair, the leather creaking and stretching. "I prefer to think of it as a mutually beneficial partnership. You help maintain financial irregularities, and I ensure your past remains buried. And like I mentioned, in time, I might even assist with your return to medical school and licensure. I have connections at the state board."

"You're asking me to risk prison."

"I'm asking you to assist with 'resource allocation,'" Jun Wu corrected. "Every hospital does it to some degree. The system is designed to be manipulated—by insurance companies, by pharmaceutical firms, by government agencies. We're claiming our share. Right now, I need you to help me with an upcoming audit."

Xie Lian closed his eyes. He thought of Hua Cheng in the kitchen, hands moving across gleaming stone, pans spitting oil. Then before sleep, fingers running through hair. And mornings: honey dissolving in tea. Coffee: which he was beginning to like.

What would it mean to bring corruption into this? To soil the sheets they shared with ink from Jun Wu's contracts?

He imagined it worse. Hua Cheng losing his job, his license. The thing that gave him purpose in life, a purpose Xie Lian once knew. To drag Hua Cheng down with him. To see those hands made useless. To watch him pack up his crimson scrubs, turn in his badge.

"I'll need guarantees," he said. "That certain people remain untouched."

"Your surgeon," Jun Wu nodded. "Interesting choice. He's not known for attachments."

Fear climbed Xie Lian's spine like an insect. "My personal relationships aren't relevant."

"Everything is relevant, Dr. Xie. Especially what we love." Jun Wu slid a readied document across the desk. "Your consulting agreement. The compensation is generous."

After years of counting coins for laundry, the figure was obscene.

"One signature." Jun Wu handed him a fountain pen.

Ink fell from the tip, unfurling on the signature line. Xie Lian signed beside the splotch, trembling-jagged script forming stem and thorns. Jun Wu collected the document with a satisfied nod.

"Excellent. We'll begin next week. Ling Wen will provide your credentials and tasks."

"Is that all?"

"For now." Jun Wu rose and extended his hand. "Welcome to upper management, Dr. Xie."

***

Wuhan Union Hospital was overwhelmed, but Xie Lian, motionless as nurses draped sterile gowns over him, prepared for a second emergency craniotomy. Hair disappeared under caps. Scrub nurses counted instruments. IV lines fed blackout drip. Monitors ticked nervous Morse. Ventilators sucked away lung glue.

He, Xie Lian, began again. Tired, yes, but his purpose sure. There was work to do.

The man beneath his hands had met a car on a rain-slick road. The car had won. Now, blood pressed against the inside of the skull, each heartbeat squeezing the brain tissue that housed everything the man had ever been or would be.

"BP 90/60, heart rate 110, ICP reading 28 and climbing," anesthesia announced.

Xie Lian nodded. "Let's move quickly. Mannitol infusion?"

"Already running at 0.5 grams per kilo."

He made first incision. The scalp peeled back, held with clips that resembled tiny crocodile jaws. Drill whined against bone. Not like wood or metal; bone has its own distinctive resistance. With the bone flap lifted, the dura mater—mother tough, she is named—bulged blue-black with trapped blood. The knife opened her, and the subdural hematoma released itself in a dark and glutinous rush.

“Suction,” he called, and the fellow cleared the field.

"ICP dropping to 22," anesthesia said.

Xie Lian found the torn vessel, a bridging vein along the superior cerebral surface. So small to cause so much damage. "There's the culprit. Bipolar."

Under magnification, he cauterized it, the field then irrigated with warm saline.

"Let's check for additional bleeding sources." For several minutes he lifted with retractors and checked for clot extension. "Hemostasis appears adequate,” he decided. “Ready for closure. We'll leave a subdural drain.”

The drain, the dura, the bone, the muscle, the skin—each layer restored. Skull was repositioned and secured with titanium plates and screws.

"BP stable at 110/70. ICP down to 14," reported anesthesia.

"Estimated blood loss?" Xie Lian asked, stepping back from the table.

"800cc, replaced with two units PRBCs and crystalloid."

Xie Lian nodded, stripping off his gloves. "Transfer to neuro ICU for hourly neurological checks and continuous ICP monitoring. Keep the head elevated 30 degrees. Maintain MAP between 80 and 90 to ensure adequate cerebral perfusion pressure."

Later, he stood at the sink. 2:17 in the morning.

He hadn’t meant to recall it, but he thought of Yunnan, the first time he'd touched a living brain. A rural clinic, equipment fifteen years obsolete. The boy had fallen from a tree; bone fragments had driven into the brain, requiring debridement. The attending neurosurgeon, a visiting doctor from Shanghai, guided Xie Lian's hands beneath his own.

He discovered, then, a sensitivity in his fingertips, a higher kind of proprioception. Later, in residency, they called it his gift: the ability to perceive tissue planes, to find seams where growth parted from healthy matter.

The intensivist materialized at his side. "Dr. Xie, I'm ready for handoff when you are."

***

It was a room designed for bad news. Not just in the cushioned chairs and the boxes of tissues, but how light fell, muted and oblique. These rooms kept their own hours.

The family turned to Xie Lian right away. He had a thought, not for the first time: they resembled plants in a darkened room, bending desperately toward any source of light.

Three figures. The mother, her hands busy with destruction, turning tissues to confetti. The daughter—resemblance evident in the tilt of chin, the bridge of nose—sat straight-backed. The husband slumped in crumpled business attire, his tie askew. Their

particulars mattered less than their collective state: waiting for him to pull them toward one shore or the other.

"Mrs. Li." He addressed the mother. "I'm Dr. Xie. I performed your son's surgery."

"Is he—?"

"He's stable. The surgery went as well as we could have hoped."

"So he's going to be okay?"

"It's too soon for certainties." He lowered himself into the chair opposite. "Head injuries are complex. He's being transferred to the neuro ICU where we'll monitor him very closely. The next 24-48 hours are critical. We need to watch for swelling, rebleeding, or signs of infection. He'll remain sedated and on a ventilator overnight."

"When will he wake up?"

"We'll begin weaning sedation tomorrow morning, if his condition allows."

The father ran a hand through unwashed hair. "Will there be... damage?"

"Until he wakes up, we won't know the full extent of the injury," Xie Lian explained. "If there is, the brain has remarkable plasticity, especially with rehabilitation. But recovery takes time and patience."

He gave them twenty minutes. He explained the machinery, the tubes, the procedures, the schedule of rounds. He answered their circular questions, recognizing that they needed to ask more than they needed answers.

"The neuro ICU nurses are exceptional," he told them as he rose. "They'll call me at the first sign of concern."

Mrs. Li caught his sleeve. Her fingers were cold. "Doctor, do you miss it?"

The question caught him off guard. "I'm sorry?"

"Being a surgeon." Her voice changed timbre, became a man's voice, cool and knowing. Jun Wu's voice. "Having your hands inside a brain, holding a life in your palms."

The consultation room changed, walls darkening to expensive wood paneling.

"I... yes. Every day."

"What would you sacrifice for another chance?" The woman,no longer Mrs. Li, features blurring, leaned forward. "Your license. Your career. Your purpose."

"That's not possible."

"Everything is possible, Dr. Xie." Jun Wu, the pretense of Mrs. Li entirely abandoned, extended a document across a vast desk. "One signature. A small compromise. And you become Dr. Xie Lian again."

He stared at the paper. A consulting agreement with figures so enormous they escaped the page's confines, numbers tumbling, tangible, like scattered rice onto the floor.

"Nothing comes without cost," Jun Wu said. "But surely this merits consideration? To save lives rather than scrub floors? Your talent is wasted scrubbing toilets."

He hadn't signed it, he was certain, and yet there at the page's bottom on second glance: his name.

His viscera turned to cold, wet clay. "I didn't sign this."

"Didn't you?"

The daughter stepped forward, transformed: severe hair

pulled back, glasses, tablet held to chest.

"I'll provide your credentials Monday," Ling Wen said. "Your consultant office is located on the third floor, adjacent to administration."

"No—this isn't—" Xie Lian stumbled backward. "I didn't sign anything. I was only trying to protect—"

"Did you know the medical board is reviewing Dr. Hua's cases?" Jun Wu said. "Such a shame—a brilliant surgeon with an impeccable record facing sudden scrutiny. One anonymous complaint about impaired judgment, and his career hangs by a thread." Against the back wall, Hua Cheng's crimson scrubs hung empty and slack. "Everything is relevant, Dr. Xie. Especially what we love."

***

He woke with a start. The darkness pressed close in the on-call room, and for a moment he was unmoored. This was not Wuhan. No, he recalled, settling back into himself: Tonglu General Hospital, where San Lang had drawn the overnight surgical shift. That warmth at his back was San Lang.

Earlier, he'd urged Xie Lian to return home, but he'd refused. Instead, he'd curled himself onto the narrow bed, the two of them chest to back, listening to trauma pages throughout the night.

The dawn light, thin and gray, fell through the small window. He eased out from San Lang's loose embrace and padded to the bathroom; it was a cupboard really, with barely room to turn. In the mirror, his face appeared little changed, perhaps a few more lines around his eyes, but his hands, he knew, no longer held lives in balance. Now they mopped floors, changed bulbs, unclogged toilets. Simple work. Necessary work.

And now, accomplice to fraud.

Over the weeks, they established their patterns. Two nights at Xie Lian's apartment—though he'd begun to think of it less as home than as a place where his things happened to be stored—and two nights at Hua Cheng's. Weekly hot pot, without exception, and other restaurants when the mood struck, but the hot pot remained inviolate. Men must have their rituals. During the days they didn't share lunch, they'd send each other pictures of their food as if to assure one another they were taking care of themselves.

Xie Lian learned that San Lang had opinions about the proper way to load a dishwasher, which led to their first real argument—fifteen minutes of debate that ended with both of them laughing. He discovered that San Lang was incapable of leaving the last bite of anything, would always push it toward him with a casual "you finish it." They began coordinating their grocery runs, texting "need anything?" before stopping at the store, until Hua Cheng's cupboards held an odd collection of Xie Lian's preferred tea alongside the good coffee and expensive wine.

There was the way they'd started timing their morning routines to steal an extra ten minutes together, and how Hua Cheng had cleared drawer space, hung an extra towel in the bathroom, made room in the medicine cabinet for Xie Lian's cheap drugstore face wash. Xie Lian found himself leaving clothes at San Lang's place because the machines were running anyway, and wasn't this what couples did? They developed a shorthand for exhaustion, a shoulder touch vocabulary that meant *rough day* and *I know* and *we'll order takeout.*

San Lang would sulk, actually sulk, if Xie Lian mentioned being cold, as if the apartment's temperature were his own failing. He'd bought three different types of humidifier and replaced the air filter on the air conditioner after Xie Lian coughed once. He spent an entire Saturday rearranging furniture until the reading light hit the couch at the right angle. When Xie Lian praised the coffee one morning, San Lang's face lit up like he'd been awarded a medal, and the next day there were four new bags of beans lined up on the counter like eager soldiers awaiting inspection.

Yet even in this sunlight, clouds passed.

He found himself missing the maintenance closet with its mop water funk. Now he sat in an administrative office, such as it was, a corner of Ling Wen's domain partitioned off with movable screens, attempting to parse ‘budgets’ while his reflection caught in the computer screen: a man playing at respectability in the same two dress shirts. The same two, because they were all he had.

The carpet here was beige, spotless, its particle board desk also playing at the respectability of real wood. His chair was ergonomic and somehow more uncomfortable than the cracked vinyl stool where he used to eat his lunches in the basement break room.

Tomorrow, he lied to himself. *When the time is right, I'll tell San Lang about Jun Wu.*

There were ways to broach these subjects, surely. Other people managed difficult conversations all the time, but the words, when he reached for them, were never there. He was fluent in postponement.

He began to worry. If he didn’t speak soon, what then? Secrets were waiting to fall from his nerveless hands and shatter at their feet. And what would grow from those fragments? Resentment, perhaps. San Lang might hate him.

The hospital moved around him: morning rounds, afternoon crises, evening admissions. A cornered spectator to the dance where he'd once been prima ballerina, then janitor, now observer. San Lang would emerge from surgery and find him bent over spreadsheets that refused to make sense, numbers that would not balance no matter how he arranged them. The books were cooked, as they say. Had been cooked so long they were charcoal.

"You're working late again," San Lang would observe, but Xie Lian would hear: *Why this? Why now? Why administration?*

Didn't you enjoy being a janitor? Wasn't there dignity in that work, in being part of what made this place run? The way San Lang

saw it—and Xie Lian agreed—every job here mattered. Surgeons couldn't operate in filthy rooms. Patients couldn't heal in squalor. Someone had to do unglamorous work and there was honor in doing it well. So, why?

Because Jun Wu had given him no choice. No choice—no choice no choice no—what choice? What fucking choice when the man smiled and—no choice. None. Not a single goddamn—

He felt more frightened now than he ever had. *Cooperate and San Lang stays safe. Safe safe safe. San Lang untouched, unharmed, un—*

But was that really all of it? Or had Jun Wu's promises, the nectar of them so sweet, worked their way into his bloodstream?

Spreadsheets alight with phantom invoices for equipment never ordered, consulting fees paid to companies real only on paper.

Paper.

Nothing but paper.

This is wrong. Each keystroke. *This is stealing.* Each click. *This is—*

But then Jun Wu's words: "Such talent, wasted in maintenance. Perhaps we could find a way to expedite your medical licensing."

The thought came at odd moments.

Creating false vendor accounts—**he missed it**.

Backdating receipts—**missed it**.

———————————

"Dr. Xie," Jun Wu said,

never *Mr.* Xie

always *Doctor*

like morphine in his veins

———————————

The moment everything clicked: diagnosis clear, plan formed, hands steady. The moment when he was needed not just as a body but as a mind. A mind admired, trusted, loved.

You were a neurosurgeon, people said. Past tense. Were. Was. Had been. Had been had been had been.

———————————

Jun Wu spoke in future tense:

"When you return to surgery—"

"Your patients will need—"

words pounding his skull like rain on a roof when you're small enough to believe it will never stop.

———————————

He created another shell company, gave it a plausible name: Meridian Medical Consulting.

This is stealing, the voice repeated, but it grew fainter each day.

What was the alternative? To clean floors until the end of time while his brain atrophied? To watch younger doctors make mistakes he could have prevented if anyone had listened to the janitor? To grow old in dishwater-grey maintenance scrubs, his skills reduced to knowing which disinfectant worked best on blood? Blood he used to stanch, not clean.

He spiraled back again to what was and what is no longer. In the old days, when Xie Lian wore blue scrubs rather than janitor grey, he had valued the knowing of his hands above all else—their ability to find and feel things other neurosurgeons couldn't, but also the way families gripped those hands afterward. The way they looked at him like he was—like he was—

God. They looked at him like he was God.

Thank you doctor thank you thank you you saved her you saved him you saved—

Hero. That's what he'd been. Hero with steady hands and a brilliant mind.

Now he found himself valuing only the nebulous concept of "later." Later, he would tell San Lang. Later, when the numbers had done their work and the future had taken clearer shape. Later when he was someone again.

"Numbers," Xie Lian murmured, gesturing at the screen where phantom vendors bred like digital rabbits, "they're stubborn things."

San Lang leaned closer, and Xie Lian caught a whiff of iodine on his scrubs. Still saving people. Still mattering. Still **hero.**

"Since when do you care about hospital finances?"

Since they became my way home, he might have said.

Instead: "Ling Wen needs the help."

Lying. He had grown skilled at this too.

What was this, if not medicine? Diagnosing the hospital's vulnerabilities, excising funds from their accounts, harvesting healthy tissue to graft onto his gangrenous situation.

In his screen's reflection, he was a man hunched over figures, but in his mind's eye, he wore blue scrubs again and stood over a

patient.

Blue: the color of veins, of breath. Of life.

Was that so wrong? To want to matter again? To—no. Stop.

Tomorrow, he promised himself. Tomorrow.

Tomorrow he would find a way to confess. Tomorrow, when he had figured out how to explain that he was stealing to protect San Lang's career. And to matter again. To be sought. Asked. **JUN WU HAD GIVEN HIM NO CHOICE.** What else could I have done? **IT WAS COERCION. DURESS.** Doctor doctor doctor not sir not you not hey clean this up. Blue not grey not invisible not mop-water-chemical-hands. **IT WAS TEMPORARY. JUST UNTIL HE COULD GET BACK TO SURGERY.**

Tonight, he saved the file. Powered off the computer. Drove San Lang home through streets of rain.

The numbers, stubborn as he had said, bent to his will.

***

Hua Cheng's head rested against his thigh, mouth parted, breathing in air conditioner dreams. The laptop balanced on the couch arm, trackpad clicking as Xie Lian scrolled through vendor accounts. He typed in another invoice number while his other hand rested in Hua Cheng's hair. The TV had gone to some late-night infomercial, someone selling kitchen knives that could cut through aluminum cans.

Late nights like this reminded him of the days he stayed up to finish chart notes so his medical assistants wouldn't have to. They needed sleep more than he did and had families to go home to. Back then, he wasn’t on great terms with his father and rarely visited home.

His fingers found the rhythm: tab, type, tab, type.

_____

PATIENT: Self

CHIEF COMPLAINT: Unable to sleep

NOTES: Exhibits classic signs of

NOTES: Patient appears

NOTES:

———————————————

Delete. Delete. Delete.

$12,847 for equipment consultation services. He tabbed to the next field, entered a date. Hua Cheng's breathing was steady against his leg, warm through his pajama pants.

The spreadsheet cells looked like hospital rooms from above: neat rows, everything in its place. He saved the file and closed the laptop. The room went dark except for the blue glow of the cable box clock.

2:47 AM.

The apartment settled—wood expanding, pipes ticking. The air conditioning kicked off and the sudden quiet made everything else louder: breath, refrigerator humming, cars passing outside.

His hand moved through Hua Cheng's hair, damp with sleep sweat. His left leg had gone completely numb under Hua Cheng's weight.

The coffee table still had their dinner on it. Takeout containers from the Thai place down the street, chopsticks balanced on the edges. Grease mixing with the vanilla candle Hua Cheng lit earlier that had burned down to nothing but a pool of wax in its heavy glass holder. On the TV, someone was demonstrating a juicer now. The volume was turned almost all the way down so only colors moved across the screen—peachfuzz pink and lime green pulverized together when he wasn't really looking, just letting his

eyes unfocus until everything became blended shapes against the wall behind them.

Xie Lian shifted and flexed his foot, trying to get feeling back in it without waking Hua Cheng. Pins and needles shot up from his ankle. Strange how you could lose all sensation without noticing, how numbness crept in so gradually that by the time you realized what had happened, the return of feeling was always a shock.

***

"So then she says—and I swear to god, Mu Qing, she actually says this—'I never thought you'd be so gentle with the patients.'" Feng Xin gestured with his chopsticks, nearly flinging a piece of kung pao chicken. "What did she expect? That I yell at women in labor?"

Mu Qing sipped his tea, looking as though enduring a root canal. "Fascinating."

"I mean, she works in L&D too, she sees me with patients all the time, but apparently she never really... noticed? Until we started, you know." He cleared his throat. "Dating. Until we started dating."

They were at the same strip mall restaurant they'd been coming to since Feng Xin and Mu Qing started their residencies in America. Red vinyl booths, fluorescent lighting, and a fish tank by the register that had been holding the same three goldfish for as long as Xie Lian could remember. The lunch rush was winding down.

Xie Lian pushed a piece of sweet and sour pork around his plate, watching the sauce congeal. Feng Xin had been talking about Jian Lian for twenty minutes now, but Xie Lian felt like he was watching it through glass.

"Xie Lian." Mu Qing said. "You're not eating."

"Hm?" He looked up to find both of them staring at him. "Oh. Just not very hungry."

"You ordered the biggest thing on the menu," Feng Xin pointed out. "The family combo. For a family."

"I'll take it home."

"You always take it home. When's the last time you actually finished a meal in front of us?"

Xie Lian couldn't remember. Food had become mechanical lately, fuel to keep him upright while he worked through spreadsheets. Even at Hua Cheng's apartment, with actual good food and someone who noticed if he didn't eat—even then, everything tasted like cardboard.

"I'm fine."

"You're not fine." Mu Qing set down his cup. "You're weird. You've been weird for weeks."

"Thanks for the diagnosis, Dr. Mu."

"Don't deflect." He looked to Feng Xin for backup.

Feng Xin looked between them, torn. "You do seem... I don't know. Distracted?"

"He's in love," Mu Qing said dryly. "Makes people stupid."

"Hey—"

"Not you, Feng Xin. Well, actually, yes you. But I meant—" Mu Qing looked over at Xie Lian. "Is Dr. Hua making you miserable? Because if he is, I'll have words with him."

"It's not San Lang. San Lang is... he's perfect."

Feng Xin and Mu Qing exchanged a silent conversation full of raised eyebrows and subtle head tilts.

"Then what is the problem?" Feng Xin asked gently.

I'm embezzling money from the hospital.

"Work stuff."

Another look passed. This one said *he's lying* and *we both know it* and *what do we do about it?*

"Xie Lian," Mu Qing said carefully, "if something's wrong—really wrong—you know you can tell us, right?"

For a moment, he almost did. Almost opened his mouth and let it all spill out: Jun Wu and the threats and the promises and the way his hands shook every time he entered another false invoice. The way he'd started checking over his shoulder in parking lots. The way he'd begun to hope, despite everything, that maybe this time next year he'd be wearing blue scrubs again. But then he thought about Feng Xin and the uncomplicated joy of someone whose biggest problem was impressing a girlfriend. Thought about how Mu Qing arranged for Xie Lian to get his custodial job in the first place.

They'd already sacrificed enough for him. Had already followed him halfway around the world when his life imploded and almost took them down with him, abandoning their own careers in China to start over as foreign medical students in a country that made them prove themselves from the bottom up. Mu Qing had spent two years working as a medical assistant before getting his anesthesiology residency. Feng Xin had delivered food for DoorDash between studying. All because they'd refused to let him face his exile in lonesome. Xie Lian would be damned if he'd let his choices drag them down.

"I'm fine," he said. "Just tired."

***

Xie Lian found himself summoned again. The email had been brief—*Please see me in my office at 8 PM to discuss your adjustment to your new management position*—and had arrived during his lunch break, turning the remainder of his day into an exercise in contained dread, and he spent an hour in the hospital library trying

to read the same medical journal article three times without absorbing a word.

He knocked on the wood door at exactly eight, all other offices dark, fled from for suburban weekend plans.

"Enter."

Jun Wu's office felt smaller each time Xie Lian visited. The Director sat behind his kidney bean desk, but tonight he'd moved the visitor chair—pulled it around to his side and angled it toward him rather than across the desk.

"Dr. Xie. Right on time, as always." He gestured with a Mont Blanc pen, gold nib catching lamplight. "Please, sit. I thought we might have a more informal chat this evening."

Doctor doctor doctor.

The chair placed them close enough that Xie Lian could see the individual threads in Jun Wu's shirt cuffs, could smell his cologne, bergamot and cedar.

"How are you finding your new job?" Jun Wu smiled. He reached over to pat Xie Lian's knee, but stayed as though his hand had as much of a right to be there as San Lang's.

Palpation of patella, Xie Lian's mind supplied from afar. *Firm pressure applied to the superior aspect of the joint.*

But underneath: *Warm warm warm.*

"The files require careful attention," he managed.

"Indeed. From what Ling Wen tells me, you've taken to the work quite naturally. She mentioned you've been staying late and really throwing yourself into the details."

搞什麼鬼*,* Xie Lian thought, native language slipping in. *What the hell is this.*

"You know, I've been thinking about our working relationship, Dr. Xie." Jun Wu's other hand came up to rest on his shoulder. "You're adjusting well to the administrative side, but I want to make sure you're not having any issues."

医生

doctor

doctor

the word

he

lost

"How about we start having regular check-ins? Lunch once a week?" Jun Wu leaned closer, close enough to see the pores around his nose. The cologne was too sweet.

The hand on his shoulder slid over to cup his nape. *Restraint of the occipital region.*

"I... don't think that's necessary," Xie Lian said.

"Nonsense. I insist." Jun Wu's fingers tightened, collared him like a dog. "I take a personal interest."

Warm lamplight cast everything in amber, making the scene feel sepia-toned like an old photograph. He could smell the heated bulbs, dust burning on expensive tungsten.

这个人有病. *This person is sick.*

"I should go."

"Should you?" Jun Wu's thumb dug into the vertebra below his hairline. P*ressure applied to C2.* "Actually, I'm glad you brought up leaving. I've been meaning to discuss some concerns about departmental dynamics and costs."

San Lang San Lang San Lang.

"Dr. Hua, for instance. Dedicated surgeon, but has a tendency to push boundaries with hospital policy." Jun Wu's thumb stroked his neck. "Budget requests that bypass proper channels." He shook his head with dismay. "Just last week he requisitioned surgical supplies without going through procurement. Very independent but problematic. Tell me, in your administrative review, have you identified any areas where we might reduce emergency department expenditures?"

Keep him safe safe safe.

不能让这发生. *Cannot let this happen.*

"Be sure to let me know if you do," Jun Wu went on without waiting for a reply, "but that brings me back to our weekly check-ins. I'll need your verbal commitment to this arrangement."

Past and present collapsed:

Dr. Xie, sign this incident report. Dr. Xie, the medical board requires your cooperation. Dr. Xie, this is for patient safety. Dr. Xie, you understand the situation.

医生医生医生 *Acute stress response. Tachycardia. Diaphoresis. doctor doctor doctor* 不能呼吸不能呼吸 *can't breathe can't breathe Sympathetic nervous system activation*

"I understand," Dr. Xie cleared his throat.

"I thought you might." Jun Wu's hand lifted from his sternum, then gave two light taps to it—casual, paternal. *Percussive contact. Feigned familiarity.* "Shall we say Tuesdays?"

***

In the men's restroom down the hall, the automatic faucet wouldn't sense his hands. He waved them under the sensor three times before water finally came, scalding hot then ice cold. The paper towel dispenser was empty. Just the metal teeth where the

roll should feed through. One fluorescent tube flickered in the corner, casting shadows across rows of water-spotted mirrors.

Xie Lian gripped the sink until his knuckles went white. That pink soap that never quite lathered—the smell of it combined with something sour from the drain.

操他媽的. *Fuck.*

He pulled out his phone. The screen was cracked in the corner—had been since last week—and his thumb traced over the fissure while he stared at San Lang's contact photo. He was smiling at the botanical gardens.

When? Two weeks ago? Two months? Time had become unreliable.

Xie Lian [8:47 PM]

Finished with work stuff

He deleted it, typed again. His hands were shaking. The words looked wrong on the screen.

Xie Lian [8:48 PM]

Finished with work stuff. On my way.

The response came immediately:

San Lang [8:48 PM]

I'll start dinner. Drive safe.

Five words and he wanted to crawl through the phone and disappear into that warm apartment with its good coffee and soft sheets and hands that touched him with love.

In his car, the radio played something soft and forgettable while he tried to scrub the feeling of Jun Wu's fingers from his skin. At red lights, he found himself checking the rearview mirror, watching for following headlights, for cars that took the same turns.

好想吐. *I want to vomit.*

The bar smelled like spilled beer, fried food, and cleaning solution that, no matter how hard it tried, couldn't mask the years of cigarettes from back when you could smoke indoors. Xie Lian focused on that smell because it was easier than focusing on the way the room tilted to the left every time he moved his head too fast.

The booth was red. Fake leather. Cracked in places where the stuffing poked through like little white tongues. One mouth had been duct-taped over, but it peeled at the corners and curled in on itself. He traced it with his finger, wondering how many scratches it took to wear through fake leather, how many Friday nights of people sliding in and out, how many pocket buttons catching a small tear until the whole seat had been gutted open.

Bird-caged yellow bulbs hummed overhead. Or maybe that was his ears. Mismatched chairs, too many legs. Stools listing on bad knees. The walls sweat numbers, carved in deep and jagged with a cheap knife or a key. Everything was too much to focus on. Someone laughed about something stupid. Everything was sticky: the floor, his skin, his mouth. He couldn't tell if the heat was from the alcohol or the lighting or too many bodies in one place. He tasted pennies, and his thoughts stuck together like the old receipts in his wallet he never threw out. Time, too. It was all happening, but not in order.

"—so I'm telling this guy, listen, if you're going to stick a light bulb up your ass, at least use a LED, they run cooler—"

That was Zhu. Trauma nurse. Everyone called him Butcher behind his back because he could get an IV into a patient no matter how bad their veins were or how thick his hands were, but always left them bruised. Right now he was gesturing with his beer bottle, condensation dripped onto the table in perfect little circles.

Xie Lian watched the circles form. Counted them. One, two, three, four—

"Gege."

Hua Cheng's voice slid in, callused thumb catching on the braille of him. Bone-knob, ridge-line, soft hinge. Then finding slow, consistent sweeping momentum across one of his vertebrae where the skin thinned and the bone sat shallow.

It made him think of that anthropology class he took in undergrad, the one with the lecture hall that smelled like dust and lysol wipes. The professor had said you could learn to tell each bone by touch alone. *"The cervical vertebrae are easiest,"* she'd said, *"they look like a giraffe head."*

And now Hua Cheng's thumb was tracing it, that small, giraffe-shaped bump of him. C3, maybe C4. He couldn't stop thinking about it—that someone could be identified by that alone. The shape of a bone.

“Gege,” Hua Cheng repeated.

"Mm?"

"You're staring at the table."

He looked up and Hua Cheng's face—concerned, trying to figure out if Xie Lian needed help or just observation—came into focus.

"Just thinking," he said. His tongue felt thick.

"About Zhu's rectal foreign body stories?"

“Yeah.”

San Lang laughed. Beautiful when he laughed. Beautiful always, but laughter made him more so.

The whiskey had crept up on Xie Lian somewhere between the third and fourth glass, and he wasn’t sure where he was now in terms of count. Peanut salt stung the dry edges of his nail beds. A napkin stuck to the bottom of his glass came up half-dissolved when he tried to sip from it but found it empty of all but ice slivers. One of them tapped his tooth and lit up the root with a flare.

Yin Yu slid out of the booth. "I'll get the next round." Always organizing, always counting. Probably knew exactly how many drinks each person had consumed.

"Just beer for me," Hua Cheng said, not looking away from Xie Lian. "Gege?"

"Yeah. Another would be good."

Hua Cheng's thumb paused its sweeping motions over his neck. "You sure?"

"It's Friday." Xie Lian tried for a smile. "Friday is supposed to be fun, right?"

One of the newer trauma nurses—he couldn't remember her name—was telling a story about a patient who'd superglued his fingers together trying to fix a broken mug. She gestured wildly. Young enough to still find the job exciting instead of exhausting.

"Why didn't he just throw the mug away?" she asked.

"Some people don't like throwing things away," a senior nurse said, who Hua Cheng worked with regularly. "Even when they're already broken."

Xie Lian sucked on an ice chip. He liked to push them against the roof of his mouth until it went numb.

"Remember that motorcycle accident last month?" Zhu was saying. "Guy versus semi. Looked like hamburger when they brought him in."

"Zhu…"

"What? I'm just saying. Boss here spent eight hours putting him back together. Kid walked out two weeks later."

"Barely walked," Hua Cheng corrected, but he was smiling. "Still has nerve damage in his left hand."

"Still *has* a left hand," Zhu pointed out.

They talked about Hua Cheng like he wasn't sitting right there. Like he was a legend instead of a person who left coffee rings on the counter and hummed off-key in the shower. Xie Lian wanted to tell them things they didn't know—how San Lang fell asleep reading medical journals, how he apologized to houseplants when he forgot to water them, how he made lists for everything but lost the lists within hours.

They had the clean version. The headline. *Chief of Trauma Surgery*.

Xie Lian used to be like that.

It burned in him low, with the same pitch as the salt prickling his nail beds. Jealousy. Capsaicin. Verdigris. He loved San Lang, but he was a little bitter, too.

Hua Cheng was looking at him fondly, he realized suddenly, and rallied from his fugue. Yin Yu was setting fresh drinks on the table. Beer for everyone else with another whiskey for him. The glass looked enormous.

"Sorry, San Lang.” He sheltered the drink under himself. “Tell me about the motorcycle guy."

Hua Cheng told the story. Xie Lian watched his mouth, his fingers. They could rebuild someone's life in eight hours.

"—microsurgery," Hua Cheng was saying. "Reconnecting vessels smaller than angel hair pasta."

"Gross comparison," the new nurse said.

Xie Lian took a long pull of whiskey. "Bathroom," he announced and slid out of the booth. The floor felt uneven under his feet but he managed to walk without weaving too badly.

The bathroom smelled like industrial soap and urinal cakes. He splashed cold water on his face and stared at himself in the

spotted mirror. Flushed cheeks. Glassy eyes. Hair sticking up where he'd run his hands through it. He looked like someone's idea of what "falling apart" was supposed to look like. Strange how normal he felt. At what point, he wondered, does a person realize they're "falling apart?" Maybe it was like going bankrupt, slowly, then all at once. Or maybe it was the opposite. Maybe you could walk around looking like hell for weeks, months even, while feeling perfectly fine inside.

When he got back to the table, Zhu was talking about Qi Rong. His fingers were square-cut, scarred across the knuckles, and the way they moved—wide arcs, sharp turns—reminded Xie Lian of cleavers.

"—saw him in the parking lot again yesterday," he was saying. "Security escorted him off the property, but he was back this morning trying to sell essential oils to patients' families."

"Someone should have him arrested. It's harassment."

"Hard to prove," Yin Yu said. "He's technically on public property when he approaches people."

Xie Lian slid back into the booth. Hua Cheng reached out and pulled him in like keeping him close was a reflex.

"What's he selling this time?" he asked.

"Same stuff," Zhu said. "Miracle cures, homeopathic nonsense. Told Mrs. Chen her husband's diabetes could be cured with oregano oil and positive thinking."

"Predatory."

"The worst part," the new nurse said, "is he keeps name-dropping his medical background, telling people he's a 'former physician' who discovered the truth about Western medicine."

Xie Lian's stomach gave a slow, delayed roll.

"He was never a good doctor," Hua Cheng said.

"Why'd he lose his license anyway?"

"Malpractice. Multiple incidents. Perforated bowels, missed diagnoses."

Xie Lian brought his glass close enough that his lip didn't touch, but the peach fuzz did.

"Must be hard," he said. "Losing everything like that."

The table went quiet for a moment.

"Hard to feel sorry for him," the senior nurse said and wrinkled her nose.

"I don't feel sorry for him," Xie Lian amended quickly. "Just... wondering what that does to a person. Going from doctor to... whatever he is now."

He drained the rest of his whiskey, then flagged down the waitress for another.

"Speaking of people who think they're God's gift to medicine," the senior nurse said, ready to change the subject, "did you guys see Pei Ming's latest TikTok?"

"Oh god," the new nurse groaned. "The one where he's doing surgery prep but making it look like a strip tease?"

"I still don't understand how he ended up in cardio," Zhu said. "His brother's in ortho, figured it was a family business."

"Different skill sets."

"Different everything. Little Pei's serious and professional. Big Pei's out here trying to seduce the entire nursing staff."

"He's a natural heart breaker," the senior nurse said. "Of course he went into cardio."

The table erupted into skittering laughter. Zhu choked on his

beer.

"Oh my god, he probably chose his specialty based on pickup lines. 'Baby, let me fix your broken heart.' 'I know exactly how to make your heart race.'"

"Stop," Hua Cheng said, but he was laughing too. "I have to work with this man."

"'Did you know I'm a specialist in matters of the heart,'" Zhu added in his gaudy Pei Ming impression. "'Let me show you my bedside manner.'"

Xie Lian started giggling. Alcohol made everything hilarious and watching Hua Cheng laugh was making his chest feel warm, bubbly. He tried to add something—Pei Ming and that time he got kicked out of the staff holiday party for karaoke abuse—but his voice didn't carry far and the two women talked over him.

Zhu inclined his head, as though apologetic on their behalf: *You were saying?*

Xie Lian tried again. "Wasn't he the one who—what was it—got banned from the karaoke bar for bringing his own fog machine?"

One of the nurses glanced his way, blinked like she hadn't realized he'd spoken at all, then turned back to Hua Cheng with a follow-up joke forming.

Xie Lian slumped back, stomach whiskey-bloated. It felt like one of those suspended punching bags, and that the nurses were taking a knock at him just for something to do. He could even feel himself swaying in his seat, that same rhythmic motion as though hanging from a chain, absorbing impact and returning to center while they moved on back to San Lang. They were so quick to laugh. So ready to follow the tail feathers of his voice no matter how small the comment. When Xie Lian spoke—nothing. Blank faces. A moment of lag, like he'd been muted without realizing.

Was he background noise now?

Was he less than San Lang?

He hated it. Jealousy was an ugly color. He picked out another ice cube with his tongue, sniffing out the starchy citrus smell at the bottom of his glass.

The new nurse laughed. It reminded him of the sound his mother's sewing machine made when the tension was strung wrong, that high mechanical stutter. She angled into Hua Cheng's space, begging for his attention.

What was her name again? Something with an L. Or an M. He'd seen it typed out in Lucida Sans on one of the new-hire memos, reviewed the salary package—mid-range, high benefits—and skimmed the probationary clause without reading it fully. The paper had been clean. Heavy-stock. One of the expensive printer trays. Her signature was a loop-heavy scribble. Who knew what even his official job title was anymore, or what his designated duties were supposed to entail. Administrative something. Assistant to the something. Coordinator of whatever needed coordinating.

His job was whatever Jun Wu or Ling Wen felt like tossing at him on any given day. HR paperwork one week, inventory management the next. Sometimes he was reviewing new-hire packages for people who would make more than him within six months; sometimes he was updating spreadsheets that no one would ever look at again; sometimes he was sitting in meetings where his only function seemed to be making the headcount look more impressive, even though no one in the room made note of his existence except Jun Wu, like someone handling their service animal that had slipped under the table and taken a nap—aware of its presence, vaguely responsible for it, but not expecting it to contribute anything meaningful.

Something, then, occurred to him. Jun Wu had given him keys to rooms he'd never imagined entering, let alone wanting to, but he had no doubt that any request he made would be met with very little resistance. Jun Wu was shockingly companionable even if intolerably disgusting. Once, Xie Lian had submitted a flagged invoice at midnight—barely more than a sentence with no attached

justification—and it had come back approved by morning, no questions asked. Surely he could do the same with her.

New nurse. Unnecessary onboarding cost. Performance under review. Departmental excess.

He'd already half-flagged her in the last quarterly audit due to actual performance concerns that always went away after the first few months of adjusting to a job. Name in a spreadsheet, yellow cell, no action taken. But he could send it now. Tomorrow. Monday. Tuesday. Whenever his fingers weren't whiskey-thick. Hell, even as was, he could.

His stomach lurched with excitement this time. Warm, narcotic comfort. He could do that. Actually do it. Type a few words in the right boxes and she'd be gone. Someone had done it to him before. He wondered if it was just as easy for them as it would be for him. It felt good to know something might move when he pushed it.

He teethed along the fragile rim of his glass—sucked fog from it with an inhale while Hua Cheng's hand rubbed widening loops into his back, easing him into a low slump against the table.

Someone—the senior nurse—was telling a story about walking into the supply closet last week and finding Quan Yizhen fast asleep standing up, leaning against the shelves like a broom someone had forgotten to put away.

"I thought he was dead," she said, "just standing there with his eyes closed, arms crossed. Turns out he'd been awake for thirty-six hours and his body just... shut down mid-inventory."

The mental image of it struck Xie Lian as the funniest thing he'd ever heard. He laughed so hard he was having trouble catching his breath, and when he tried to gesture with his drink to emphasize some point he'd already forgotten, his elbow knocked into Yin Yu's beer bottle, sending it skittering across the table.

"Whoa, easy there," Zhu said, grabbing napkins to dab the spill.

"Sorry, sorry," Xie Lian giggled. "I was just—it reminded me of—" He blinked slowly, trying to remember what he'd been about to say.

"The call room," Hua Cheng prompted.

"Oh yeah! The call room! Because last week I walked in and —And there was... there was..." The room moved sideways and the table felt further than it should.

Everyone went quiet, suddenly aware that Xie Lian had crossed the line from 'tipsy and fun' to 'actually quite drunk.'

Hua Cheng squeezed his hand. "Gege, maybe switch to water?"

"I'm fine."

"I know. But you've had a few—"

"I said I'm fine," Xie Lian snapped. His chest felt tight with what'd been building since the first time someone at this table looked through him.

Everyone looked over, then away. Polite non-attention. Zhu drug one of the beer-saturated napkins in a circle with the tip of his finger.

A hand returned to the back of Xie Lian's neck, then a kiss to the crown of his head. "We're gonna get some air," Hua Cheng told the table.

The bar smeared out behind them—yellowed light and plastic overheated under too many elbows. Outside, Xie Lian sucked in cold air and stumbled over an uneven patch on the sidewalk, catching himself on the brick wall.

Hua Cheng's voice seemed to come from far away. "You sure you're okay?"

Xie Lian opened his mouth to say he was fine, but his throat

felt tight, saliva flooding his mouth in that warning way. He shook his head quickly, regretting the motion as the world pinwheeled. He thunked his forehead against the brick and breathed carefully through his nose. In. Out. In. Out.

"I drank too much."

"A little," Hua Cheng agreed. "Want some water? I can grab a bottle from inside."

"No. Don't go," Xie Lian whined, low and warbled.

"Okay. Okay. I'm not going anywhere." Hua Cheng's hands framed Xie Lian's face, thumbs brushing over his cheekbones before sliding back to tuck the loose strands of hair behind his sweat-tacky ears. "You're burning up, gege. Come here."

He guided Xie Lian down to sit on the concrete step by the bar's entrance, crouching in front of him.

"Let me help unbutton the top of your shirt. You'll feel better with some air—"

The bar door swung open, wafting out bergamot and cedar cologne. Rich. Expensive. Familiar. The smell hit him at the moment Hua Cheng's fingers touched his throat. His hand shot up and slapped them away.

Hua Cheng looked down at his fingers like he was checking them for something sharp. When he looked back up, he was already cataloging what he'd done wrong, the same look he got after losing a patient, when he'd stand perfectly still in the hallway and run through every decision point where he could have done better.

The man with the cologne walked past them.

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian said quickly. He snatched Hua Cheng's hands and pressed them against his cheeks, desperate to erase whatever lecture he was giving himself. "It's okay. You're okay. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. San Lang, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to—I don't know what's wrong with me."

"Gege, I would like it if you told me what's wrong, but right now, just breathe. You're okay."

But he wasn't okay. None of this was okay. The drinking. The lying. The spreadsheets. Jun Wu. The weekly lunches he'd agreed to. The way he'd traded his integrity. Even now, even here with Hua Cheng's hands gentle on his face, his fingers itched to pull out his phone and send that document flagging the new nurse with how much it pissed him off having her even cross his mind. Just a few keystrokes and she'd be gone. It would feel good—the only control he seemed to have anymore.

"San Lang." His voice cracked. He squeezed his eyes shut and leaned heavy on the step railing. "I'm sorry."

"For what? Getting drunk on a Friday night? That's what Friday's are for."

"I'm just sorry."

He pressed his thumb into the mortar between bricks until it hurt. The taste of bergamot was sticky in the back of his throat. His neck felt exposed even with his collar too tight and he pulled his jacket higher without thinking why.

Jun Wu had started appearing at his desk. Tuesday, Thursday, sometimes Friday afternoon when most people had left early. Always with some small question, leaning over Xie Lian's shoulder to point at the computer screen. The hand that rested on the back of his chair always found reasons to adjust his collar, smooth his shoulder, run up and down his nape like fingers in a jewelry box—picking up this, examining that, putting things back in the wrong places. Everything rearranged. His body a room someone else had been through, looking for something specific but touching everything anyway. He'd started showering twice a day and still felt grimy. Film-coated.

"Ready to go home?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian nodded, but the motion pitched him forward. His ribs cinched; he curled around it, elbows on knees, throat flexing

with a dry heave that didn't go anywhere yet still made his eyes sting.

"Please."

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Hua Cheng's arm stayed wrapped around Xie Lian's waist, fingers hooked through his belt loop to keep him from listing left and invisible sidewalk lips from snagging toes.

His shoulder bumped a lamppost. "Careful," Hua Cheng murmured.

They passed another bar with its neon beer signs, then a laundromat where someone had left a load of whites tumbling behind a round glass door. A cat picked its way across the street, pausing to look at them before continuing to whatever important cat business it had.

Xie Lian tried to count his steps but kept losing track somewhere around seven. He wasn't even aware they'd made it back to Hua Cheng's apartment until he was sitting on the closed toilet lid, Hua Cheng pulling off his shoes and socks. His toes curled at the cold shock of bathroom tile.

"When did we—?"

"Just now." Hua Cheng fumbled with Xie Lian's belt. "You did good, gege."

Had he? Xie Lian couldn't remember the elevator up. Just the cat's yellow-green eyes and then suddenly here, in this small space that smelled of toothpaste. The shower was already running and the overhead light had been dimmed to soft gold instead of fluorescent glare. Steam fogged the mirror. He watched his reflection disappear piece by piece, starting with the edges and working inward.

"Arms up," Hua Cheng said, and Xie Lian obeyed without thinking.

Muscle memory, maybe. The maids in his youth used to peel him like fruit. School blazers, pressed shirts, stiff collars that left red marks on his neck. The blood of wealth, though now poor, knew its old gold. His body still expected to be tended to even after years of doing everything himself.

His shirt slid over his head, taking with it bar smoke and beer and whiskey and bergamot. He shivered, goosebumps rising along his ribs and shoulders. He clutched his arms around himself. Was he too thin? Had he lost weight? His ribs felt prominent under his palms, and when had that happened? While bird-pecking at lunches, maybe, surviving on nervous energy.

He must have been wearing some kind of face—mouth pinched, eyes drunk-panicked—because Hua Cheng smiled, and it smoothed down Xie Lian's nervous feathers.

"Gege," he said, "is it okay if I help you with the rest? You'll feel much better after a shower. The hot water helps."

Xie Lian nodded. Hua Cheng's fingers worked his belt buckle, leather cracked where it folded. The jeans came down and bunched around his ankles until he stepped out of them one foot at a time, hand braced against Hua Cheng's shoulder for balance. Suddenly, he was naked, and Hua Cheng paused. He rolled his bottom lip between his teeth, thinking something out, focused around Xie Lian's collarbone rather than lower.

"Gege, I don't want you to slip in the shower," he said. "Is it okay if I get in with you? We're not going to do anything, and if you want, I won't even take off my clothes."

"But San Lang," he giggled, helium in his lungs, "your clothes will get wet."

It struck him as impossibly funny: jeans and button-down plastered to Hua Cheng's skin like he'd walked through a thunderstorm.

But Hua Cheng didn't laugh. His hands stayed loose at Xie Lian's sides, ready to catch him, but wary of becoming invasive. Xie

Lian found himself counting the wisps of mineral-sweet steam, anything to focus on besides his own nakedness. Shower spray drummed steady against the tile, and he could, again, taste copper on his tongue.

His shoulders had lifted toward his ears without him noticing. When had he started holding his breath? When had his arms crossed over his chest? But Hua Cheng's eyes stayed on his face, patient, and slowly Xie Lian's arms dropped back to his sides. The air here tasted clean. No bergamot.

"Okay," he whispered. The fist in his chest unclenched. "But you can take off your clothes, San Lang. I don't mind."

Hua Cheng guided him back to the toilet seat. "Sit for a moment."

Xie Lian watched him unbuckle his belt. Zipper down, fly half-slack. Hua Cheng's fingers worked the top few buttons of his red shirt, then gave up halfway and pulled it over his head, arms crossing to grab the hem. Pectoralis major contracting, serratus anterior rippling.

"Ready?"

Xie Lian nodded and let himself be pulled upright. Waves of steam hit his face like wet cotton forced down his throat. The tile was slick under his soles, tilting left and right in wild swings, but Hua Cheng's arm wrapped around his ribs before his knees gave out entirely. Water needled his scalp, too hot, too much. Pulse thin in his wrist. Everything spun clockwise around the drain.

"Head down," Hua Cheng murmured, guiding him to lean toward the corner of the shower where the steam was thinner. "Breathe slow."

Cool air found his face in the pocket away from the spray. He braced himself against the wall while water continued to run down his spine, carrying away the salt of nervous sweat.

"Better?"

Xie Lian managed a nod.

"Can I wash you?"

Another nod.

Soap bottle click. Warm hands. Gentle, lathering circles, working from his neck downward.

Xie Lian's eyes fluttered closed. He hadn't realized how starved he'd been for this. Skin on skin without agenda. Fingers gentle as though navigating around fractures but with enough pressure to ease the tension collecting in his shoulders.

Hua Cheng's hands worked soap across his chest, and Xie Lian looked down to watch the path the water took—over the soft flesh around his middle that wasn't quite flat anymore. Not fat, but not lean muscle either. Since when? Alcohol magnified every perceived imperfection. And his nipples—god, were they normal? They felt small. Had they always been that color? That shape? But it was the scar on his hip that made him want to crawl out of his skin. White, raised, earthworm-thick and banded from falling off his bike at seven. His mother had to pick gravel from the gash with tweezers. He only ever seemed to notice it when someone else might be looking, and Hua Cheng was looking. And what about the scar below his ribs? That terrible, awful thing.

"I'm disgusting," he mumbled, swaying.

"What?"

"Look at me." Words thick, petulant. "I'm fat and ugly and—"

"Gege, you're not—"

Xie Lian's stomach lurched suddenly, violently. "San Lang, I have to—"

He doubled over, retching. Half-digested peanuts and whiskey splattered the shower floor, chunks swirling toward the drain. He hadn't moved fast enough and vomit caught in his hair.

Another heave; this time empty bile and a sob. Tears leaked from the corners of his eyes—hotter than the shower spray, saltier—and his nose ran in-between hiccups.

"I'm sorry, I'm sorry—"

Each sob made his diaphragm spasm, which triggered more nausea, which made him cry harder.

Hua Cheng's hands gathered his hair away from his face. His other hand moved in slow circles between Xie Lian's shoulder blades.

"It's okay," he murmured. "Just get it out."

Another wave hit. Xie Lian heaved until his ribs ached. "I'm disgusting," he sobbed against his knees.

Hua Cheng's hand never stopped moving across his back. "You're not. You're just drunk, gege. It happens."

The water ran clear now, but Xie Lian could still taste alcohol and shame, pine resin-stubborn against Hua Cheng's efforts to wash it from his skin.

"Look at me. I can't even—I'm falling apart."

"You're human," Hua Cheng said simply and kissed Xie Lian's temple. "You're allowed to fall apart sometimes. I love you. Drunk, sober, sick, healthy. All of it. Here," they sank to the shower floor together, "sit with me for a while."

Hua Cheng pulled Xie Lian into his lap. His kneecaps pressed into the tile like two pale stones and the grout line ran right through the middle of the left one. The tile, he thought, must have been hard against Hua Cheng's tailbone, but he didn't seem to care. Skin to skin, chest to chest—softer belly against a firmer one. Xie Lian's belly button filled with water, with soap run-off. Their flaccid dicks squished against one another, and Xie Lian found himself thinking they felt like sleeping mice: warm, small, harmless in their stillness.

Hua Cheng's breathing made Xie Lian's entire torso rise and fall—a boat on gentle swells—and made the water droplets on his chest break and reform like a spider web full of dew. Without thinking, Xie Lian mouthed at his shoulder—not kissing, just pressing lips to skin in small, repetitive motions. Salt and soap residue on his tongue. He stayed close the way some people chew their lips to keep steady. The shoulder was solid, broader than Xie Lian's own, with a small mole he traced with the tip of his nose; it looked like someone had dropped a coffee bean.

Hua Cheng's hand moved in slow circles across his back again. "You're okay, gege Let me know if you need to vomit again."

A string of saliva connected his lip to Hua Cheng's shoulder when he pulled back. He sniffled, pitiful, a little petulant about his own drunken misery.

Hua Cheng cupped his cheeks, thumbs moving in arcs beneath his eyes. The pads of his fingers had started to wrinkle from being in the water.

"Feeling better?"

Xie Lian nodded and a tear fell into the groove of his nose. Hua Cheng caught it with his thumb before it could reach the corner of his mouth.

"Will you tell me what's been eating at you eventually?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian's throat swelled. He wanted to open his mouth and vomit again. This thing inside him, corrosive as gastric acid, eating through the lining of who he used to be. It dissolved him cell by cell until he was nothing but a thin, ulcer-pocked membrane.

The alcohol left him with leaden eyelids. He poured himself into Hua Cheng's chest—sternum to sternum, rib cage against rib cage, bones fitted like locked antlers. Warm here. Safe here.

"I want—" His eyes welled up. "To tell you about—"

說了就完了 *(I can't say)*

"—about the—"

累死了 *(so tired)*

Tomorrow, his mind crooned.

Tomorrow when the acid in his stomach *tomorrow* stopped eating him alive.

"Gege?"

His head lolled forward. Water ran down his spine, pooling in the small of his back before spilling over the edge. Hua Cheng's thumb licked the knobs of his vertebrae—C7, T1, T2—and somewhere between the counting and the shower's heat, Xie Lian let himself go slack.

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Xie Lian, stop pretending.

The man you used to be—so far gone he was never real. Don't flinch.

Your reputation is only your reputation until the newspapers forget your name. Like how the brain won't remember brilliance, no matter how many times you practice suturing in dreams.

Xie Lian, are you listening? The most honest part of your body is wherever it becomes storm glass.

Here's the truth about your nobility. Carve it down to bone-white rage. Don't lie. Call it what it is.

Here's tonight. Sign your name. Here's the shower. Confess. Here's the crimson man. Hold still.

Xie Lian—look up. The surface is so far above you now.

Here's a mop bucket with dirty water and a conscience trying to float. Yes, a needle so dirty and a vein so hungry.

Xie Lian, don’t fight the tide. It pulls you out into bergamot seas, a noose of kelp around your name. Here’s the salt becoming sweeter than anything you remember.

I swear, it almost feels like absolution.

His consciousness bobbed somewhere above him, tethered by the thinnest of strings. Each breath a tide rushing in, rushing out, leaving salt-white residue on the shore of his ribs, on the inside of his wrists where they'd been kissed until they bruised late plum purple. The ceiling fan turned lazy circles, a metal lotus blooming and closing. He counted rotations—seventeen, eighteen, nineteen—but the numbers slipped away. Was it still night? Or had morning crawled through the blinds?

A shadow passed between him and the spinning metal sun. San Lang: a fallen maple leaf descending from alloy branches, red-gold sheering the light.

Sunday, Xie Lian thought. *Not Saturday, not Friday. Hangover was yesterday.*

Yesterday: the slow crawl back to human. To function. Hua Cheng bringing him toast cut into triangles and water in a glass with a bendy straw, electrolyte pills. Last night: Saturday sliding into Sunday, when he could finally brush his tongue without puking.

His tongue found the corner of his mouth. Dry.

"San Lang."

A rustle of sheets, mattress dipping. "I'm here."

Here: staying when someone vomits whiskey into your shower drain.

Xie Lian turned his face into the pillow. Blessed darkness. Everything softer this way, when the room couldn't watch him.

"Gege?"

He wanted to say *touch me.* He took Hua Cheng's and pulled it to his ribs, palm smoothing the bone ladder.

The mattress dipped again—a wobbling web—and then there

were lips against Xie Lian's temple. His forehead. His eyelids. Hua Cheng reached over to the bedside, twisting the dimmer low until the light turned to mosque-window gold. But even through closed lids, Xie Lian felt the glow pressing fingertips against the membrane of his eyes.

"I want—" How did people ask for this? He might never learn. "Can we do it?"

"You still seem tired, gege. Are you sure?"

"I'm sure." And he was.

Their hands found one another, fingertips sliding over the thin, webbed skin between each finger. It tickled. Made him want to curl his fingers closed.

Hua Cheng mouthed at his collarbone, then worked upward —throat, the soft place behind his ear. His body reacted, arching, before his brain could catch up. Like that first taste of medicine as a child: bitter, chalky, the way your whole body shuddered it down, shoulders hunching, then the pleased exhale when you swallowed. The instinct to curl toward what might heal you, even if it burned going down.

He could smell Hua Cheng's shampoo. Clean, expensive. His belly felt warm, low pressure gathering behind some invisible thumb-stopped valve. He sighed, soft and pleased, then tilted his chin up and parted his lips. *Kiss me. Kiss me.* Hua Cheng's mouth tasted like mineralized mint, hard water on toothpaste.

He'd said he meant to get a filter for that. Soft water for his gege, because hair like Xie Lian's deserved better than harsh minerals that weathered its gloss. Always thinking of kindnesses. Always tomorrow, for Xie Lian.

As they kissed, his eyes drifted sideways to the star-speckled window. There, caught in the glass, was his half-dissolved outline looking back. A stranger wearing his skin with a mouth open and thieving. He flinched at the shape of himself and felt a childish urge to wipe the mirror clean with his palm.

"Wait." He caught Hua Cheng's wrist. "Can we—could we try something else?"

Hua Cheng smiled, cooed. "What does gege want?"

Xie Lian's mind scrambled through explanations that wouldn't worry him. How to say: *I am too much inside this skin. I want to dissolve into until there's nothing left to hate. No body or face that reminds me of all the ways I've been rearranged without my permission.* He thought of his mother's jewelry box—the one with the ballerina that pirouetted when you opened the lid. How he used to press his thumb over the tiny mirror inside, blocking the dancer's reflection. Just the music, then.

"Something to—over my eyes. I saw it in a movie once and I thought—" He shrank. "I wanted to try it. With you."

Not entirely a lie. He had seen it once, years ago, late-night cable when his parents thought he was asleep. It appealed to him now. Intimate and safe and removed.

"A blindfold?" Hua Cheng's eyebrow arched. Always the one above his remaining eye. His empty socket was bare, skin puckered like the pit of a stone fruit.

Xie Lian wondered what it was like to live always half-blindfolded. To see the world through a single lens, half its landscape permanently erased. *Does one eye weep for the other? Does it hide the parts of yourself you couldn't bear to look at? Parts of others?*

Was ignorance of my failings the gift the world gave you for taking your eye?

"If that's—if you don't mind." God, he sounded like a teenager asking to hold hands. "I just thought it might be... nice. To focus on feeling instead of—"

"Of course, gege." He seemed pleased, excited by the prospect of—if not new things themselves—then at least Xie Lian asking for them. He looked around the room. "But I don't have—"

"We could use one of your pajama shirts."

Pillow-warm laughter. "My smart gege." He kissed Xie Lian's forehead. "I'll be right back."

He padded to the closet and returned with a loose shirt worn thin as tissue paper from being loved too long. It smelled like him.

"Here." He folded the shirt over once, twice, until it was a wide band. "Tell me if it's too tight."

Xie Lian lifted himself on his elbows and tilted his chin up. Fabric blocked out the window, lamplight, San Lang's face. Most importantly, himself. Knuckles brushed the shell of his ear, a few baby hairs stinging in the catch of the knot.

"Too tight?" Hua Cheng asked.

Xie Lian shook his head. He sank back into the pillows, all his nerves like flowers rooted in his skin, tilting toward San Lang.

Hua Cheng palmed the insides of his thighs, bunching and gathering the boxers he'd been padding around the apartment in. Sunday mornings, stacked in months, peeled a person from propriety.

His thighs clamped shut—"*ah!*"—around Hua Cheng's wrists as they tickled the crook of his pelvis.

"So sensitive, gege."

And he was, more so in the dark. Flushed, he turned toward the pillows, but Hua Cheng caught his jaw, thumb tapping his bottom lip.

"Shy?" said Hua Cheng. "After that sweet little sound?"

He wanted to part his lips and take that thumb in his mouth, feel its callus rough on his tongue and imagine—remember, rather—how Hua Cheng's pupils had dilated. He'd done it once before; it'd driven Hua Cheng half-wild, made him claw and clutch as he came,

panting into Xie Lian's shoulder while trying to drag him inside his ribs.

That's what it was. *Metabolare.* Xie Lian made the word up from the Latin root: to be broken down but incorporated. Made essential.

Recalling this, his throat made a thin noise. He opened up, muscle by muscle, helpless and eager for Hua Cheng's hands, delaminating like wax left too near heat. In darkness, he stopped anticipating and began only to want. In some strange way, it made him feel high—that he was inconsequential and everything important sloughed off him, dissolving him as it went until he thinned to nothing but a mote cupped in Hua Cheng's palms.

Hua Cheng's fingers slid beneath his shirt, hot at his waist. His mouth followed the path of his hands until he reached one of Xie Lian's nipples and flicked his tongue against it. He kissed down the slope of his chest, his stomach, until he reached the hip crease and nibbled it. Xie Lian gasped, boosted his hips, striking Hua Cheng's jaw with an audible, dull thunk.

His hands flew forward in instinct. One of Hua Cheng's hands had come up, rubbing where Xie Lian's pelvis clocked him.

"Oh my god—did I hurt you? I didn't mean to, I didn't—San Lang, I'm so—"

"It's okay, gege," Hua Cheng tried to cajole.

Xie Lian tilted Hua Cheng's face, trying to read it without sight. There—under his right thumb—a smile. Crooked, small enough to hide from the room, but not from this close.

"You're smiling?" he asked, incredulous.

"It was cute."

"Cute?"

"You startled."

"I thought I injured you!"

"You worried about me. That was cute too."

Xie Lian groaned, then huffed, thumbs tracing fond arcs over Hua Cheng's cheeks like one might calm an eager dog pressing its head into your lap at dinner.

Hua Cheng leaned in, kissed the center of Xie Lian's chest, and pulled the shirt over his head. The fabric snagged at his wrists. Xie Lian flexed them without thinking and it was gone, his nipples pebbling under the bedroom’s chill. The blindfold had slipped, one side pulled tight, the other loose over his cheekbone and letting in a sliver of light. As Hua Cheng moved to fix it, Xie Lian glimpsed his smile, stupid with love, and couldn't help but smile too.

Hua Cheng took a nipple into his mouth and suckled, thumbing the other in lazy circles. Then he resumed his path from before, moving down Xie Lian's ribs to the pliant slope of his lower belly, kissing it, pinning his hips. He nosed at the feathery trail of dark hair, tickling it with puffs of his breath. Two fingers slipped under the waistband of Xie Lian's boxers. His thighs tensed, eased, tensed again, hovering at the edge of locking around Hua Cheng's skull and trapping him.

Suddenly, a car sped by outside the apartment with such force, blaring its horn so loud, the two of them nearly lurched off the bed together.

Xie Lian snorted. Hua Cheng fell into helpless laughter. He buried his face into Xie Lian's stomach, and the giggles vibrated up through him, becoming a sputtering of trapped air, a raspberry.

"Stop—stop making fart noises on my stomach!"

"I didn't do it on purpose!" he insisted, then did it again.

Then he pulled off Xie Lian's boxers. Cool air hit his weepy cock; he shivered. Laid bare but for the blindfold, he felt like a half-finished sketch in graphite—background missing, edges uncertain—moving through a narrow space where shadows swept up around

him, curling like a tunnel folding overhead, flickering in scratchy lines like fire drawn frame by frame.

Hua Cheng must have been leaning over him. Xie Lian could feel his heat, like warmth rising from summer pavement as it slips into the shade of the house awning, right before sunset.

"Is this okay?"

"Mn, yeah."

Hua Cheng pinned Xie Lian's wrists above his head. His thigh between Xie Lian's felt transgressive at first, kneecap nudging the underside of his balls. His muscles turned to finch-wings, frenetic in their skin cage.

Hua Cheng took his cock with his free hand and measured its heft, giving it a couple squeezes to feel it twitch. He smeared beads of precum over the head, then swept the salt-damp of his thumb along the flexing crease of Xie Lian's pelvis and thigh. *Sartorius muscle. Iliopsoas tendon.* That ticklish place like warm, fizzing soda.

The room seemed to tighten, grinding its knuckles into Xie Lian's temples. Hua Cheng's daylight rolled closer, carrying the smell of him—something laundered, clean, a trace of himself left behind on pillowcases, blunting the sensory overload.

Breath feathered his cock, warm, but not yet touching, anticipation refracting beneath cotton darkness. His knees parted a fraction wider, although his instinct was to tense shut, flutter, and ward off.

"Still with me?" Hua Cheng's voice resonated in the bowl of his pelvis.

Yes—he breathed, but the word didn't make it through his lips, manifesting in the soft-bodied jump of his hips. Hua Cheng's tongue ran the slit of his cock, then flattened in one long stroke under the head. Xie Lian's thighs snapped tense, toes flexing, thin cords standing out on the tops, ball-joints of his ankles grinding the sheet.

Hua Cheng's mouth shallowly circled the head. His free hand coaxed Xie Lian's knees apart, finger pads stroking anxious thunder out of calf muscles. Xie Lian turned his face into the bunched pillow, lips parting around a breath sigh. His pinned wrists ached. Blood thrummed through the radial arteries. He thought of light he couldn't see—how it might sluice the cold sweat gathering at his temples and collar, how well Hua Cheng always found the seams of him coming unraveled and pressed them flat.

Forming a steady seal with his lips, Hua Cheng sucked and laved at Xie Lian's cock with catlike flicks. He hooked one of Xie Lian's knees over his shoulder, which flexed and curled with nerve shocks. Every so often, his heel tapped against Hua Cheng's back—a soft, unintentional kick.

Xie Lian's breath grew damp, his jaw slack and numb, chin tucking into his chest as if to brace himself from inside his own body. His body curled with the urge to clench but found itself instead rolling open. He heard his voice leaking—the hiccuped vowels, "nh—" and "ah—ah."

"San Lang—I—going to—" The words slid out dizzied. "Please—I'm—close—please—"

He shuddered, that rising brightness knotting in his belly, pelvis drawing back but wanting forward.

Suddenly, Hua Cheng's mouth disappeared; he squeezed the root of Xie Lian's cock, cutting off his orgasm mid-spasm like a stopper-cork. Pleasure balled up sharp behind his navel. He jolted like he'd been shocked. For a moment, he thought it might burst out of him some other way: through his throat, his eyes, his ribs splitting open. His thighs kicked once, reflexive, as if trying to shake the tingling loose through his legs. His cock throbbed swollen and unsatisfied in Hua Cheng's hand; he tried, hopelessly, to thrust up and through that locked fist, but Hua Cheng held him still.

"So greedy," Hua Cheng kissed Xie Lian's belly and let go of his cock. He worked upward, peppering his whole torso with kisses until reaching his lips. "Look at you."

Hua Cheng’s thigh—the muscle ample and defined even beneath sweatpants—nudged higher to cradle the hang of Xie Lian's balls.

Xie Lian whimpered and tipped his hips up, grinding against his thigh, slow at first; sweatpants dragged rougher than skin, his nerves all glassy and pink.

“Fuck,” Hua Cheng groaned. He palmed the fat ridge beneath his sweatpants, thumb dull against the head of his cock, hips thrusting minutely into the cage of his own fist.

Xie Lian’s thighs trembled, his ass clenched, spine flexing as he chased any friction he could get. God, this was working his glutes. Was this a glute bridge? This was absolutely a glute bridge.

The quick, repetitive drag, sticky-rich, peeled him open: sweat dappled his upper lip, the musk-mineral sweetness of them both softening the air to velvet in his lungs.

Hua Cheng's words fell close to his cheek. "Is gege going to cum like this on my thigh?"

"Oh—please—mhm." He pleaded with his nodding.

Each forward grind raked Xie Lian's nerves luminous. There was the taste of blood—clean, this time, the way exertion draws iron—somewhere just behind his teeth.

Hua Cheng had to be smirking. "God. You really might."

He squeezed Xie Lian's jaw, forcing his mouth open into a pliant, slack 'O.'

"Gege, do you know how much I love your mouth?"

The room tasted of sweat slow-cooked in the folds of their clean laundry. Hua Cheng's thumb pinned his bottom lip, exposing the shine of his gums and causing him to drool a little.

"You say the smartest things with it—make plans, give

orders, talk circles around people who think they're clever." He tilted Xie Lian's face side to side, squishing his lips into a helpless *mmfh*. "But look at you. You don't even know what to do with it now, do you?"

Xie Lian made a noise—"*nnnh—uhh*—"—like he was trying to form a word but couldn't get past the pressure on his jaw.

"You're so beautiful when you're like this," Hua Cheng murmured, nosing at his cheekbone, kissing the corner of his mouth, tip of his chin. "Do you like it when I fuck your mouth?"

Xie Lian nodded—frantic, short—motion barely allowed by Hua Cheng's grip, but impulse trying to thrash loose nonetheless.

Hua Cheng made a noise between a laugh and a hum, so smug it became affection. "Yeah? Does gege want to be good for me?" He tipped Xie Lian's chin up. "Open."

Xie Lian complied, jaw stretching the way he imagined prey does for mercy.

Then the wet click of gathering saliva, and Hua Cheng spat in his mouth. For a second, he was shocked, the back of his mouth now saline and faintly bitter. When he swallowed—throat working twice—it moved down like a viscous, brackish ribbon. Blinded and pinned, he felt bright with obedience, burnished with want and helpless pliancy.

Hua Cheng's voice hooked him—"Good boy, gege."—and he kissed Xie Lian again, tongue pressing against the ridge behind Xie Lian's front teeth like he was checking his work.

He filled Xie Lian's mouth, tongue broad then thin at the blade, tasting deep—Xie Lian softened as Hua Cheng eased him open. There was the sensation of being rinsed, not just kissed: taste rebounding off enamel, coating the sensitive underside of his tongue in an oxygen-rich wash. Teeth clicked. Hua Cheng licked the archway of Xie Lian's palate, tracking saliva from gumline to sidewall, then pulled back and sucked on his top lip, hard and short enough to throb.

Separating, Xie Lian sucked in a startled yawn of air. His body was soaked, drenched to the root as though every pore had filled to brimming with luster.

His next gasp was almost childishly plaintive. "San Lang—please, I want to cum."

Hua Cheng's thumb worked slow sweeps through the sweat at his forehead, pressing the baby hairs flat at his temples.

Xie Lian waited—or rather, was made to. "Why are you being so mean?"

Hua Cheng chuckled. "Look at you, gege. You're so adorable when you beg." He pinched Xie Lian's chin again. "Already whining like it's the end of the world."

"Don't—" Xie Lian's mouth snapped shut, bottom lip jutting. "Don't tease me so much."

Hua Cheng huffed a small laugh, indulging the shape of Xie Lian's pout by brushing his knuckles against it. There was a moment before Hua Cheng relented, mattress tilting with his retreat. There was the sound of the bedside drawer sliding open—wood on wood, stuttering—then the blunt plastic click of the lube cap; its faint chemical-sea scent pricked Xie Lian's nose. Hua Cheng squeezed the bottle, gel hiccuping cold into his palm.

The first smear was chilly, gentle, almost absentminded, tracing the cleft of Xie Lian's ass, then his puckering entrance. The first finger slipped in; Xie Lian jerked, but his body yielded quick, and Hua Cheng worked him loose with slow pumps. He added another finger, scissoring wide, palm crowding close, teasing that root-ball of nerves. With a third finger, the stretch moved from threshold to fullness, a quicksilver throb humming around the saddle of Xie Lian's pelvis.

Reflex had him reaching, scrabbling helplessly for Hua Cheng's shoulders, but Hua Cheng caught his wrists and buried them in the pillows.

"No," Hua Cheng tutted. "Where do your hands stay, gege?"

Xie Lian whimpered and worked his hips in hopeful, needy circles, showing off the arch of his body.

"That's better," Hua Cheng's breath chuffed. "Keep your hands there, or I'll have to tie them."

A peal of panic-pleasure jittered down Xie Lian's spine. He nodded.

Without warning, Hua Cheng gripped his waist, flipping him onto his stomach. It left him spinning, then a hard tug jacked his hips high, ass bared, thighs spread wide.

Hua Cheng's hands locked around the crests of Xie Lian's hips, forcing him to fold until his back dipped and his cheek mashed the pillow. Before Xie Lian could even breathe out, Hua Cheng's palm cracked down on his bottom, spreading peony-pink warmth.

"I love how your ass giggles," he said, self-satisfied.

He shoved his sweatpants off with one foot, then nudged the thick, lubed head of his cock between Xie Lian's cheeks. He slipped just the tip inside, the ring of muscle pulling taut reflexively around it.

"Fuck, gege—always so tight," he groaned, kneading Xie Lian's hips, "no matter how many times I fuck you."

Xie Lian's chest hollowed. He made a sound: a thin, wavering gasp, belly caged and clenching as Hua Cheng pushed two inches inside, then three. It was like sinking into scalding bathwater, whole body trying to sort the signal: burn or relief? Or like swallowing too big a mouthful of orange and over-stretching your jaw. More than fullness—crowding.

Hua Cheng bottomed out; both of them swept over with an eddy of vertigo. The first real, hungry pull yanked Xie Lian up and back—hauled down on Hua Cheng's cock just as the next thrust

drove in. Slap of thigh to ass. He was being moved, used, borderline bounced, nerves battered sweet. Some thrusts hit so deep and with such force that Xie Lian's knees splayed useless, toes bunching the sheet, a wild "ah—ah—fuh—" spilling out. The only thing keeping him upright were Hua Cheng's hands lifting his hips to meet each thrust.

He was already teetering—head light, vision limned salt-pearled at the periphery.

Then—*trill-trill,* his phone's cheerful bleat.

At first, Xie Lian barely registered the interruption; it didn't seem part of the present world. Only when Hua Cheng's thrusts stuttered did sense come back to him.

Hua Cheng reached with one hand—and Xie Lian might've protested if he could think properly—fishing Xie Lian's phone from the nightstand.

"Should we see who misses you, gege?" He rolled his hips in small, mean circles. "Oh, it's Mu Qing."

And then he accepted the call, putting it on speaker.

"Xie Lian?" Mu Qing's voice, clipped and high-strung. "Are you there? Are you—" A muffled ruckus, glass hitting a hard surface. "—look, something's wrong with Feng Xin, he won't stop, he—sit down—Feng Xin, for fuck's sake—"

Xie Lian snapped back into himself like a cork jerked from a bottle, awareness hitting with a cold rush that chased away the slow opioid drift. *Oh fuck.* He reached back blindly, fingers flailing for contact and—finding the hard muscle of Hua Cheng's thigh—slapped it in reprimand.

He mouthed—*drop the call*—eyebrows drawn in a sharp angle just at the edge of his blindfold.

Instead, Hua Cheng dropped the phone on the pillow inches from Xie Lian's open mouth.

Hua Cheng bent low, breath hot at the shell of Xie Lian's ear, then leaned back. "He needs you, gege.” He bounced his hips once —a quick smack of skin. “Answer him."

Mu Qing again: "Are you there? He showed up at my apartment and he's drunk—drunk, Xie Lian! He keeps saying something about Jian Lan and—Feng Xin, stop that—I don't know what to do, should I call someone?"

Xie Lian squeezed his eyes shut and found his voice. "Mu Qing?" he croaked, throat tight as he tried to sound put-together. "I'm here, I—what's happening...?"

“Wait, are you okay?”

Another short pump of hips. He stifled the moan in his throat. "Everything's—fine," he gasped.

"Are you sure?" Papers shuffling, a floorboard creaking under pacing feet. "You sound—what's—Are you out of breath? Don't tell me you're running." Then muffled, as though his hand covered the phone: "Feng Xin, stop throwing things!"

"Just—um—doing yoga," he said with a strangled huff.

There was silence. Then: "God, of course. You're strange sometimes," Mu Qing muttered. "Anyway, what about Feng Xin—he won't stop crying into my couch, and he spilled whiskey and, god, Xie Lian, are you sure you're okay? You’re breathing hard."

A sharp smack of pelvis to ass, and Xie Lian was jolted forward with such force, his knees nearly left the mattress.

He bit the edge of his hand. "Mnn-h—Just let him sleep it off, Mu Qing. If he's that drunk, don't fight him. You can figure out what happened with Jian Lan when he sobers up."

Hua Cheng mouthed gently at the edge of his ear as if congratulating the performance.

Mu Qing's sigh shuddered straight through the line. "He can't

sleep—he won't even sit. He keeps going on about it, obsessed—Jian Lan never called, she's disappeared, his phone's dead and then wouldn't you know it, he gets drunk and wanders here, blames himself for everything—" There was a metallic thump and muffled cursing—Feng Xin, presumably, staggering somewhere behind him in that little boxed-in apartment.

On the pillow, Mu Qing went silent long enough that Xie Lian could almost hear the stall of his thoughts, hesitant and buffered by self-disgust. A lighter, or a pen cap, snapped shut.

Finally: "I don't see why he"—words terse, trailing—"why he... puts himself through it, either." There was old resentment buried behind it. "He always did have terrible taste. She's not half as —He could do better."

Mu Qing sighed again, then snapped back to practical complaints: "Tell him if he sleeps here he has to stay on the far end of the couch."

At that moment, Hua Cheng cupped Xie Lian's dick in his palm, fingers spread wide to cage the base. He ground the heel of his hand upward, slow and firm. A stuttering *mnnhh* escaped Xie Lian as he rut helplessly into it.

He bit into the pillow—*please, please, not now, not there*—his vision behind the blindfold blanked by static. It took a breath, and then another, for him to even hear the white noise of the phone line again.

"What do you mean?" he managed.

The silence on the other end stretched with all the stubborn disavowal Mu Qing lived inside.

"I mean there are people who... who put up with him," he said, hushed as if worried even the furniture might overhear. "Jian Lan doesn't. She never did. She just liked being seen, not... not the actual—"

And Hua Cheng, having waited—a too-careful predator—

stroked him once, slow from root to tip, thumb teasing the slit. Then he cupped him again, fingers bracketing the base, palm grinding upward. Xie Lian bucked into it, the motion dragging him back onto Hua Cheng's cock. He moaned into the pillow as his hips found a rhythm that used both ends of him at once.

"Xie Lian? What—are you all right?"

Xie Lian fumbled: "Yeah—Yeah. Sorry. Just—stubbed my toe. On... on the dresser. I—uh. It really hurt."

"I thought you said you were doing yoga..."

"Yeah, it's—uh, a new pose. Really intense stretch. Didn't... didn't see the dresser behind me."

Then, Hua Cheng sang out over Xie Lian's shoulder, warm and perfectly unhurried: "It's a new variation of the downward dog. Gege's getting very, very flexible."

The phone crackled.

"...What," Mu Qing said, flabbergasted now, somewhere between disbelief and the beginning of rage. "Why is Hua Cheng—"

You could picture him staring at the phone as if he might physically throttle it.

"Mu Qing—" voice gentle as Xie Lian could muster, "Are you mad at Feng Xin because... you have feelings for him?"

"...Well, maybe that's got something to do with it. Not that it matters if he's just going to throw himself at people who treat him like that."

That was when Hua Cheng really started fucking him. The slapping grew loud enough to—surely, but hopefully not—leak into the phone line.

"Xie Lian. Are you listening? What is—what is that—what's going on, is that—"

"I'm sorry!" Xie Lian yelped, "I'm really glad you figured out your feelings, but I—ah—I really gotta go!"

As he fumbled for the END button, the phone hitched into a brief feedback loop. The slap of skin—*papapapap*—echoed back from the speaker, doubled and amplified. Then the call dropped out.

Xie Lian twisted blindly, incensed and mortified, and thwacked the solid muscle of Hua Cheng's thigh with the flat of his palm again. Once, twice—sharp, reprimanding smacks that left prints and a prickling sting in his own hand.

"San Lang, you—" Another slap.

Hua Cheng's laugh unspooled in great, helpless arcs. He fell forward over Xie Lian's back, chest shuddering with each new gust of laughter. Then Xie Lian couldn't help but laugh, too; for a moment, they were both boneless. Every snort and hiccup ricocheting down Hua Cheng's ribs and into Xie Lian's lungs, so that laughter rolled through them as a single wave. They were not just pressed together but leaking joy through their seams, stacked like a careless pile of laundry: arms and legs slack, grins mashed at odd angles, Hua Cheng's forehead sweaty against Xie Lian's nape.

Their laughter faded to hush. Hua Cheng's weight molded into the valley of Xie Lian's back, their spines daisy-chained by shallow breath.

Hua Cheng teased his hips forward, then again, nudging fitful ripples up Xie Lian's spine and drawing tiny, lilting groans. The hot, silken catch of foreskin retracting and sliding in the cradle of flesh. He nibbled Xie Lian's ear so the growl of his next breath poured right into the bone.

Dropping his head into the pillow, fabric warm and rough against his mouth, Xie Lian twisted, nose bumping Hua Cheng's forearm where it braced beside his cheek—a living bar, trembling with the weight pressing him down.

Hua Cheng's hips surged, a sudden, hungry buck. The

movement shuddered through to Xie Lian's diaphragm, forcing a coughing, bitten-off gasp. "Hh—hah—!" He scrabbled, nails finding the corded line of Hua Cheng's forearms.

Hua Cheng's lips brushed the peak of his shoulder, then fell to wild panting. Wet, bass-deep smacks where skin met skin, filthy squelches each time Hua Cheng bottomed out, his sack slapping beneath, catching tender between thighs. Sweat ran, salting the dips of Xie Lian's back, dripping off Hua Cheng's jaw and along his heaving chest.

"Ah—ahh—San Lang—!" Xie Lian whimpered.

His orgasm crept up on him in splinters, muscles singing heat up his thighs, shuddering weak each time Hua Cheng thrust especially deep—the present moment blunted on both sides. His cock throbbed in a muted, insistent fog, almost shy of climax, as if convinced release would do him in.

"Yeah, gege?" Hua Cheng growled into his ear. "Am I gonna make you come like this?"

Xie Lian gasped. "Nnh—ahh… y-yes—!"

"Feel how deep I am," Hua Cheng hissed. "You're shaking. Fuck—you love it, don't you?"

"San Lang—please—!"

"Please what?" They were rocking the bed frame now. "You wanna come on my cock? Want me to feel you clench up so tight I can't fucking move?"

Xie Lian keened. "Y-yeah—"

"Fuck," Hua Cheng hissed. "You always get like this when you're close. Gripping me like you're scared I'll pull out."

Xie Lian's hips jerked helplessly. "Ah—ahh—San Lang—can't —"

"Yes, you can. Come for me, gege."

Xie Lian cried out, a hot, crushing knot between his thighs unspooling and tearing all at once. He came, a slick rush streaking his belly and knuckles.

"F-fuck—*just like that*," Hua Cheng groaned, hips staggering. "So fucking tight when you come—holy *shit*, gege—do you even know what you do to me?"

He gave a few more rough, deep thrusts—*slap, slap, slap*—but Xie Lian's body was already pulsing, convulsing around him, that greedy heat gripping him with aftershock flutters. Hua Cheng came eventually with a guttural groan, spilling deep. His whole body bowed forward, forehead pressed to Xie Lian's shoulder, mouth slack and panting against his skin. Buried this deep, he ground his hips still.

"S-San Lang—San Lang—ah—stop, please, it's—" Xie Lian sobbed, nerves shrill and spent, hips twisting, "—too much, I can't—San Lang, please, too sensitive—"

Hua Cheng's body shuddered through the last of it, grinding thoughtlessly as if he could vanish into the warmth, as if he could leave himself behind. His hand clamped hard on Xie Lian's hip, holding them together.

"San Lang," Xie Lian gasped again; it almost hurt to breathe.

Hua Cheng rolled back with Xie Lian gathered in his arms—never leaving him, cock still locked inside. His hands, shaking, fumbled at the knot and tore away the blindfold. Cool air slapped over sweat-damp lashes. The room spun too bright after so much smothering dark.

Then Hua Cheng's arms closed around him greedily, forearms caging his middle, wrists crossed just above the jerking rise of Xie Lian's ribs as he mouthed at Xie Lian's feverish neck.

"God, gege. You're so perfect." His arms squeezed tight. "How did I get so lucky?"

The words pierced, absurd in their brightness, shining on all the cracks and twistings Xie Lian tried to tuck away. Guilt swamped him so thick he nearly gagged.

He flinched; inside, his shame moved sickly, wanting to drag him out of reach. He felt suddenly ruined, undeserving, faint with all the debris of old, ugly things. Everything Hua Cheng offered sounded impossibly meant for someone else.

But Hua Cheng kissed him again, and little by little, the tremors softened. Shame didn't vanish, but it dulled—overwritten, almost, by Hua Cheng's holding. He let himself fall back, letting the good soak some half inch down, just enough to survive another minute. Not saved, god help him, but held, which for now would have to be enough.

Outside, a dog barked somewhere down the street, and the AC vents gave its familiar metallic groan.

"Okay," Hua Cheng sighed eventually. "Let me clean you up, gege."

Xie Lian protested as Hua Cheng slipped out. "Cold," he mumbled.

"I know, I know." Hua Cheng kissed his shoulder blade, then padded to the bathroom.

Xie Lian heard the tap running, a washcloth being wrung out. When Hua Cheng returned, the warm cloth felt like heaven against his skin—gentle strokes along his back, his thighs, careful attention to where he was sticky and sensitive.

"I smell like I need a shower," Xie Lian said, then, as it occurred to him: "Oh god. I have to call Mu Qing back. He definitely knows what we were doing. I can never face him again."

"He's probably figured out his own situation by now. Drunk confessions have a way of clarifying things."

Xie Lian considered this. "True. But knowing them, they'll

spend the next six months pretending nothing happened."

"Unlike us, who are very mature and emotionally available."

"Says the man who answered my phone while—"

"—loving you very thoroughly."

Xie Lian groaned and covered his face with his hands. "The sound probably carried through the phone. The slapping. Oh god, the slapping."

"It was very rhythmic. Musical, even."

"I'm texting him an apology," Xie Lian declared, then paused, rubbing his face. "What do I even say?"

"Don't." Hua Cheng tossed the washcloth in the general direction of the bathroom. It landed on the floor. "He was probably too distracted by Feng Xin breaking his stuff."

"You think?"

"Drunk people are loud." Hua Cheng shrugged, settling back down beside him. "Plus you know how Feng Xin gets when he's upset. Probably crying into the couch cushions or something."

Xie Lian snorted. "He does get weepy when he drinks. Remember last time? With the karaoke?"

"Oh god, the ballads." Hua Cheng made a face. "Three hours of sad love songs."

"Mu Qing looked like he wanted to crawl under the table."

"Poor Mu Qing." The sympathy in Hua Cheng's voice was notably lacking. "Must be so hard, watching the person you're in love with cry over someone else. For years. Without ever doing anything about it."

"San Lang..."

"What?"

"They're my friends."

"Of course they are." Hua Cheng's smile was radiant. "And what good friends they are, always making sure you're available for their emergencies. So thoughtful of them. What was it last week? Feng Xin locked himself out of his apartment at midnight?"

"That was an emergency."

"Oh absolutely." Hua Cheng nodded earnestly.

Xie Lian sighed. "He didn't have anywhere else to go."

"He could have called a locksmith. Or slept in his car." Hua Cheng sat up, reaching for Xie Lian's phone. "Speaking of which, want to bet Mu Qing's already texted you?"

"Don't—"

But Hua Cheng was already holding up Xie Lian's phone, showing two missed messages.

"'Are you okay?'" Hua Cheng read in a tone of exaggerated concern. "'That sounded weird.'"

Xie Lian groaned and fell back into his palms. Hua Cheng flopped onto his back, one arm flung over his eyes like a Victorian maiden overcome by vapors.

"I'm dying," he announced to the ceiling.

Xie Lian huffed a laugh. "Hungry?"

Hua Cheng sat up, suddenly animated. "I'm making us something."

Before Xie Lian could point out that he was still completely naked, Hua Cheng was already padding toward the kitchen with zero self-consciousness, dick swinging as he walked.

"San Lang," Xie Lian called after him, half-mortified, half-laughing. "Clothes?"

"In my own home?" came the incredulous reply, followed by the sound of cabinets opening.

Xie Lian pulled a pillow over his face. His phone buzzed insistently on the nightstand, but instead he listened to Hua Cheng rummaging around the kitchen, opening the fridge, muttering something.

"Crackers?" he called out.

"Please tell me you're not touching food with your—"

"I washed my hands!"

"When?"

A pause. "Just now!"

Xie Lian finally reached for his phone, expecting to see more mortified messages from Mu Qing. Instead, his screen lit up with notifications from an entirely different source.

Shi Qingxuan [9:12 PM]

XIE-GE!!!! EMERGENCY!!!!

wait no not emergency but SITUATION

okay so you know how I've been trying to get He Xuan to notice me for like MONTHS

well guess what happened tonight

WE WENT ON A DATE

AN ACTUAL DATE XIE-GE

okay so it wasn't really a date at first

I brought him coffee in the morgue like usual and he was complaining about being hungry

so I was like "let's get food" and he was like "fine whatever"

but then we ended up at this 24-hour diner and he actually started TALKING

like real talking not just complaining about work

he told me about this weird case he's working on and got all animated

which for He Xuan counts as animated lol

and THEN when we were walking back to our cars he just... grabbed my hand

no warning just GRABBED IT

and when I looked at him he was like "what? your hands are cold"

BUT HE DIDN'T LET GO XIE-GE

and then he kissed me in the hospital parking lot

it was so awkward and perfect

he literally said "I'm bad at this" right before he did it

I'm DECEASED

Xie Lian blinked at his phone, a smile tugging at his lips despite everything.

Xie Lian [9:13 PM]

That's wonderful news, Qingxuan! I'm so happy for you.

Shi Qingxuan [9:13 PM]

RIGHT?? I mean I knew he liked me but I wasn't sure if he LIKED me liked me you know?

but apparently he's been wanting to ask me out for WEEKS

he said he just didn't know how to bring it up without sounding like a serial killer

which is so valid honestly like "hey want to grab dinner after I finish examining this corpse" is not the vibe

Xie Lian [9:14 PM]

Are you seeing him again?

Shi Qingxuan [9:14 PM]

TOMORROW!! he's taking me to some hole-in-the-wall ramen place he knows

apparently he's been going there for years and the owner knows his order

which is so cute?? like this man has a LIFE outside of dead people

also he held my hand the ENTIRE walk back to the cars

even when we got to my car he just... kept holding it

like we stood there for ten minutes just talking about nothing

Xie Lian [9:15 PM]

I'm really happy for you both. You deserve this.

Shi Qingxuan [9:15 PM]

thanks xie-ge □ you're the best

OH WAIT I almost forgot the BEST part

when I said "this was nice" he got all flustered and was like

"I don't really do this"

and I was like "you ARE weird but that's why I like you"

I'm literally going to combust from cuteness overload

should I post about it in the group chat??

Xie Lian [9:16 PM]

Maybe let He Xuan decide how public he wants to be about it first?

Shi Qingxuan [9:17 PM]

ugh you're so wise and mature

wait why are you even awake?? it's like 9:30 on a Sunday

aren't you usually asleep by now like the old man you are

Xie Lian [9:17 PM]

Just... watching TV with San Lang.

Shi Qingxuan [9:17 PM]

awwww domestic vibes!! what are you watching?

Xie Lian glanced toward the kitchen where Hua Cheng was still naked and, at this point, probably constructing an elaborate charcuterie board.

Xie Lian [9:18 PM]

Documentary on fox foraging.

Shi Qingxuan [9:19 PM]

boring!! you two need to live a little

anyway I should probably go

He Xuan said he'd text me when he got home and I want to respond immediately like the thirsty bitch I am

thanks xie-ge!! you're the BEST

tell hua cheng I said he better treat you right or I'll sick my new mortician boyfriend on him 😈

Xie Lian was still smiling when Hua Cheng returned, carrying a simple plate with what looked like leftover tangyuan—the sweet glutinous rice balls still soft, floating in a light ginger syrup—and a small bowl of salted sunflower seeds.

"This is a snack?" Xie Lian asked.

"Of course, I have to feed your highness properly," Hua Cheng said, settling back into bed.

"San Lang..." He felt warm.

"The tangyuan are from this afternoon. I saved some." Hua Cheng picked up a sunflower seed and cracked it between his teeth. "And these—you mentioned once that your mother used to buy them for you. Anyway, did Qingxuan text? Your phone was going off rapid fire while I was in the kitchen."

"How did you know it was him?"

"Nobody else sends that many texts that quickly." Hua Cheng handed him a spoon for the tangyuan. "What happened?"

"He and He Xuan finally went on a date."

"Good for them."

Xie Lian laughed, taking a bite of the tangyuan. The sweet red bean paste melted on his tongue, warm and comforting. "These are perfect."

Xie Lian's phone buzzed again. He glanced at it, then at Hua Cheng.

Shi Qingxuan [9:23 PM]

WAIT XIE-GE

EMERGENCY FOR REAL THIS TIME

what if I get nervous tomorrow and my stomach goes FERAL

like what if I'm mid-conversation about forensic pathology and my bowels just say NAH FAM

I have IBS xie-ge!!! stress makes it SO much worse!!!

what if I literally shit myself in front of the man I'm trying to RIZZ

this is not very demure very mindful behavior!!!

Xie Lian stared at his phone.

"What now?" Hua Cheng asked, noting his expression.

"He's... having pre-date anxiety. About his digestive system."

Hua Cheng blinked. "Oh."

Xie Lian [9:24 PM]

Avoid dairy?

Shi Qingxuan [9:24 PM]

XIE-GE this is SERIOUS

what if we're holding hands and I have to be like "bestie I need to find a bathroom RIGHT NOW or this situation is about to be giving disaster movie"

He Xuan deals with DEAD PEOPLE not LIVING PEOPLE WITH BOWEL ISSUES

although technically both involve decomposition so maybe

he'd understand???

NO THAT'S WORSE

"He's spiraling," Xie Lian announced.

"About?"

"IBS."

Shi Qingxuan [9:25 PM]

Maybe im just being delulu

it's just... he's so cool and collected and I'm over here like a whole entire MESS

anyway thanks for talking me off the ledge xie-ge

now go back to your boring documentary about fox foraging or whatever

WAIT

did you just say you're watching a documentary???

on a SUNDAY NIGHT???

with your BOYFRIEND???

XIE-GE that's giving elderly married couple energy

where's the PASSION??? the ROMANCE???

you should be doing nasty things not watching EDUCATIONAL CONTENT

Hua Cheng leaned over Xie Lian's shoulder, reading the messages over his arm. When he finished reading, he pulled back just enough to look at Xie Lian with the most insufferably smug expression.

"San Lang," Xie Lian said warningly. "Please."

"Please what?" Hua Cheng settled back against the pillows. "I'm not saying anything."

"You're thinking very loudly."

"Am I?" Hua Cheng picked up another sunflower seed and cracked it between his teeth. "I can't imagine why. I mean, if he only knew what kind of learning we've been doing—"

"San Lang!"

Xie Lian sprawled across the surgeons' lounge couch like roadkill that had achieved sentience just long enough to drag itself indoors. One arm dangled off the edge, knuckles grazing the carpet. His head lolled against the cushions at an angle that would have concerned any passing orthopedist.

Then the door burst open.

"Xie Lian! My man!" Pei Ming strode in like he was entering his own personal runway show, surgical cap askew in a way that looked intentional. "How's it—"

He stopped and took two steps back.

"Wow. You look like someone ran you through a wood chipper." Pei Ming dropped into the chair across from him and leaned forward. "When's the last time you slept? Ate? Blinked?"

Xie Lian's eyes didn't track Pei Ming's movement so much as his entire head rolled to the side, threatening to detach from his neck.

"Fine," he said.

"Fine? You look like the 'before' picture in a depression medication commercial."

Xie Lian managed what might have been a shrug.

"EEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHH-FUCK-SHIT-PISS-AAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

The ungodly banshee wail was so piercing and inhuman that both men jumped like they'd been electrocuted.

"What the fuck—" Pei Ming scrambled to his feet.

"That's..." Xie Lian was already moving toward the window. "That's definitely Qi Rong."

They pressed against the floor-to-ceiling windows that overlooked the hospital parking lot. Qi Rong—unmistakable even from this height due to his combination of wild hair and aggressive gesticulating—was sprawled across the asphalt beside what appeared to be a tipped folding table once covered in small bottles and pamphlets. His homeopathic medicine setup, which he'd been running in the hospital parking lot, was now scattered across a fifteen-foot radius.

And looming over this carnage was Jun Wu's Cybertruck.

The angular, stainless steel monstrosity's front bumper was positioned roughly where Qi Rong's table used to be. Steam, or possibly vaporized essential oils, rose from the wreckage.

"Holy shit," Pei Ming breathed against the glass. "Jun Wu just hit Qi Rong with his space truck."

Qi Rong scrambled to his feet, clutching a bottle of something. "YOU DICKLESS CORPORATE FUCK! YOU'VE MURDERED MY LIVELIHOOD!"

Jun Wu emerged from the Cybertruck calmly. He approached Qi Rong with his hands clasped behind his back, head tilted slightly as if curious about this new development.

"Mr. Qi," Jun Wu said pleasantly. "I do apologize. I didn't see you there."

"DIDN'T SEE ME?" Qi Rong gestured at his scattered inventory. "WHAT KIND OF BLIND MOTHERFUCKER ARE YOU?"

"Ah well," Jun Wu nodded thoughtfully, as if considering the logistics. "The sun was reflecting off my windshield. Sorry about that." And then he walked around to the front of his Cybertruck with all the leisurely pace of someone inspecting their garden on a Sunday afternoon, hands clasped behind his back, still smiling.

"SORRY ABOUT THAT? SORRY ABOUT—WHERE THE FUCK ARE YOU GOING?"

Jun Wu crouched down to examine his front bumper, tilting his head this way and that while picking at a small scuff. "Just checking for damage."

Qi Rong buzzed around him, flailing his arms and occasionally jabbing a finger at the back of Jun Wu's head. "DAMAGE? DAMAGE TO YOUR TRUCK? WHAT ABOUT DAMAGE TO MY—"

"Oh good," Jun Wu interrupted mildly, standing and dusting off his hands. "No dents."

Up in the surgeons' lounge, Pei Ming burst into laughter with such force that it threatened to cut off his oxygen supply.

Xie Lian didn't know whether to laugh or cry.

The lounge door burst open for the second time. Shi Qingxuan bounced in, radiating enough kinetic energy to power the hospital. He Xuan's wrist was limp in his grip. Overall, he had about as much poise as wet laundry, suggesting he'd rather be anywhere else, including six feet underground with his usual clientèle.

"Xie-ge! Hiiiiiii bestie!"

Shi Qingxuan dropped He Xuan's wrist and skipped across the room toward Xie Lian.

"Okay, but like, what are you doing up here in the fancy surgeon zone? This is giving main character energy!" he beamed, then noticed Pei Ming pressed against the window. "And why is Dr. Pei cackling like that?"

He Xuan, meanwhile, found the nearest chair and collapsed into it, accepting that consciousness was, unfortunately, still required of him.

"There's been an incident," Xie Lian said weakly, gesturing toward the window.

"Ooh, drama! We love to see it! What kind of tea are we

spilling? Someone finally snap? Oh please tell me it's something—"

He pressed his face against the glass and went silent for all of three seconds.

"Holy shit, is that Qi Rong getting yeeted by Jun Wu's Cybertruck?" He started recording with his phone. "Oh bestie, this is going straight to the group chat. No—wait—this is going to TikTok. Jun Wu really said 'anyway so I started driving' and hit a man."

Down in the parking lot, Qi Rong had escalated to climbing onto the Cybertruck's hood, using the whole vehicle as a jungle gym.

"He's insane," Xie Lian said quietly, watching Jun Wu.

"Which one?" He Xuan asked.

Jun Wu stepped back from his Cybertruck, gave it one more look, then walked around to the driver's side, opened the door, and slid into the seat.

"WHERE THE FUCK DO YOU THINK YOU'RE—"

The engine hummed to life with that eerily silent electric whir.

"NONONONONONO—" Qi Rong scrambled up the windshield, his fingernails screeching against the glass. "YOU CAN'T JUST DRIVE AWAY AFTER—"

The Cybertruck began to roll forward at a leisurely five miles per hour toward Jun Wu's lunch spot, Qi Rong spread across the roof like a starfish.

"EEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHH-SHITLORD-BASTARD-AAAAAAHHHHHH! STOP THIS DEATH MACHINE!" His voice dopplered away as the Cybertruck disappeared down the street.

Shi Qingxuan lowered his phone. "Wow, Jun Wu really said 'skill issue' and drove off." He spun around to face Xie Lian,

bouncing on his toes. "Anyway! Xie-ge, how are you? How's the rizzler?"

Xie Lian's eyes drooped in that way that suggested he knew he wasn't going to get a sensible answer. "Rizzler?"

"Yes!" Shi Qingxuan spread his hands like he was explaining something obvious. "Hua Cheng! THE rizzler! Your man! Your boo! The one with the rizz!"

Xie Lian blinked slowly. "I... still don't know what that means."

"Oh my god, you're so pure it's actually sending me." Shi Qingxuan plopped down on the couch. "Okay, so rizz is like... charm? Game? The ability to pull? Like, Hua Cheng has absolutely unmatched rizz when it comes to you."

He Xuan, from his chair, added dryly, "It's short for charisma."

"Thank you, He Xuan! See? Even our resident vampire knows rizz. Anyway—" Shi Qingxuan turned back to Xie Lian, "—how *are* things with Dr. Dreamy? You two are like, disgustingly cute together. It's giving rom-com vibes. But also, like, you look like you haven't slept in a week. Are you eating? Sleeping? Because if—"

"San Lang takes very good care of me."

"Then what's with the whole..." Shi Qingxuan gestured vaguely at Xie Lian's entire being, "...tragic Victorian orphan aesthetic you've got going on?"

He Xuan looked up from playing Candy Crush. "He's right. You look terrible."

"Yesss, you're so pale! You need some sunlight."

"I see sunlight every day. I work during the day."

"Fluorescent lights don't count," Pei Ming said, settling back

into his chair. "Neither does whatever vitamin D you're getting through office windows."

Shi Qingxuan snapped his fingers. "Wait, that's what's different! You're not in your janitor uniform. You're wearing..." He squinted at Xie Lian's outfit. "Is that business casual? Since when do you do business casual?"

"I got promoted."

"To what? Corporate overlord? CEO of Sad Boys Inc.?"

Xie Lian threw himself back down on the couch, legs sprawling wide in defeat. "Administrative consulting."

The room went quiet except for the air conditioning and the blooping sounds from He Xuan's phone.

"That's..." Shi Qingxuan paused. "That's random. Like, very random. You went from mopping floors to... consulting? On what?"

"Budget management. Financial oversight."

Shi Qingxuan opened his mouth, then seemed to recognize a conversational landmine when he saw one. "Well, um, anyway!" He pivoted. "Did you hear about Feng Xin?"

Xie Lian's head rolled back against the cushions. "What about him?"

"Okay, so you know that nurse tech from L&D? Jian Lan? The one he's been simping over for like, months?"

"...Yes?"

"Well, he knocked her up and she went completely AWOL for like a week. Just straight up vanished. Didn't show up for shifts, wasn't answering her phone, nothing. Feng Xin was losing his entire mind. Like, full manic episode energy. He was asking everyone if they'd seen her, checking the parking garage, probably about to file a missing person's report."

Pei Ming perked up. "Wait, she's pregnant?"

"Oh yeah, very pregnant. Like, can't-hide-it-anymore pregnant. Turns out she was just having a complete panic attack about the whole situation and holed up at her sister's place."

Xie Lian frowned. "How many months?"

Shi Qingxuan count on his fingers. "I dunno... five? I guess she started showing suddenly and hadn't told Feng Xin."

"Five months?" Pei Ming said. "And she didn't tell him?"

"Apparently not! Can you imagine? Poor girl was probably freaking out about how to break the news, and then one day she wakes up and boom—baby bump that can't be hidden by scrubs anymore."

He Xuan finally set his phone down. "That's... a long time to keep that secret."

"Right? So anyway, she finally comes back to work, and Feng Xin immediately corners her in the break room and she just blurts it out. 'I'm pregnant and it's yours and I'm sorry I disappeared!'"

"How did he take it?" Xie Lian asked.

"Oh, he cried. Like, full ugly crying in the middle of the break room. Happy tears, though! Then he started asking if she needed anything, if she'd been eating enough, if she needed him to carry her to her car." Shi Qingxuan grinned. "It was actually very golden retriever of him. But apparently she doesn't want it now. Oops! Too late, pookie, you're five months in! So now they're fighting again because she's all 'I can't do this' and he's all 'but we can figure it out together.'"

Pei Ming winced. "Yikes."

"Oh, and apparently—" Shi Qingxuan added this like it was totally no big deal, "—Mu Qing said something about his feelings for Feng Xin during all this. Like, straight up confessed while Feng

Xin was having his meltdown about Jian Lan disappearing."

"I'm sorry, what?" Pei Ming asked.

"Yeah! Wild timing, right? So now I'm telling Feng Xin: FIX YOUR SITUATIONSHIP, POOKIE! Because this whole love triangle thing is getting out of hand and someone needs to make some decisions before this becomes a soap opera."

He Xuan picked his phone back up. "That's the messiest thing I've heard all week."

"Right? And that's saying something considering we just watched Jun Wu commit vehicular assault on Qi Rong's essential oil empire."

Xie Lian felt his brain struggling to process this information. "Wait, Mu Qing actually told him?"

"He probably wouldn't have if Feng Xin hadn't been having a complete breakdown about Jian Lan! Mu Qing saw his chance and went for it. Very 'if not now, when?' energy. Except his timing was absolutely terrible because hello, pregnant girlfriend crisis!"

Pei Ming leaned back in his chair. "So let me get this straight. Feng Xin knocked up a nurse tech who doesn't want the baby, Mu Qing confessed his undying love, and now everyone's fighting?"

"That's the gist of it, yeah. Oh, and Mu Qing is being extra bitchy in the OR now because rejection makes him even more insufferable than usual. Yesterday he made an intern cry just for asking about anesthesia protocols."

"Poor kid," He Xuan muttered.

"Right? So anyway, I've taken it upon myself to be the hospital's unofficial relationship counselor. Starting with you, Mr. Pei Ming/Entire Nursing Staff."

"Excuse me?" Pei Ming asked.

"Oh please, your dating life reads like an AO3 tag list. 'Pei Ming/Everyone,' 'workplace romance,' 'surgeon kink,' probably 'dubious consent' knowing your game—"

"Hey now—"

"Wait, speaking of AO3!" Shi Qingxuan's eyes lit up with sudden inspiration. "What if *my* life was an AO3 fic? What would the tags be?" He started counting on his fingers again. "Definitely 'mutual pining,' 'idiots to lovers,' 'workplace romance,' 'medical setting,' 'social worker/pathologist'—that's a rare pair, very niche —'enemies to friends to lovers'—"

"You and He Xuan aren't enemies," Pei Ming pointed out.

"—'slow burn,' obviously, 'angst with a happy ending,' hopefully, 'coffee shop AU' except it's actually 'hospital cafeteria AU,' 'hurt/comfort' because hello, I deal with trauma cases—"

He Xuan looked up from his phone with a deadpan expression. "You forgot 'crackfic.'"

"RUDE! But accurate. Oh! And 'fluff and smut' because a girl's gotta have both, you know? Can't be all feelings and no—"

"Please stop," Xie Lian said faintly.

"What about you, Xie-ge? Your fic would definitely be tagged 'secret relationship,' 'hurt/comfort,' 'protective Hua Cheng,' 'soft domestic vibes'—"

"Qingxuan…"

"Oh! And 'workplace romance,' definitely 'angst,' 'drama,' 'first time'—" Shi Qingxuan winked. "Actually, wait, knowing you two it would probably be some very specific trauma backstory. Oh, and 'Pei Ming is hands-deep in a chest cavity and the entire nursing staff'—"

"QINGXUAN," Xie Lian snapped.

Shi Qingxuan's mouth fell open like someone had yanked the plug on a radio. Pei Ming's eyebrows shot up, and even He Xuan's thumb stopped mid-swipe on his phone screen.

None of them had ever—*ever*—heard Xie Lian raise his voice. Not when Qi Rong had cornered him in the parking garage last month. Not when that drunk patient had thrown up all over him and then called him a slur. Not even when the ancient floor buffer had exploded and covered him in dirty water from head to toe. Not when those nursing students had started that group chat calling him "Patient Zero" after someone spread rumors about his past in China. Not when someone kept leaving printouts of CDC articles about pandemic response taped to his locker. Not when Ling Wen had made him work a double on Christmas because "someone needs to be here, and you don't have family anyway."

Xie Lian's eyes were bloodshot, ringed with dark circles so deep they looked like bruises. His hair was disheveled in a way that suggested he'd been running his hands through it compulsively.

"I—" Shi Qingxuan started.

Xie Lian's hands were trembling where they gripped the couch cushions. "Just... stop. Please."

"Xie Lian, are you—"

Knock knock knock.

Shi Qingxuan practically launched himself at the door to escape the tension. "I'll get it!"

He yanked it open to reveal a young nurse in pale blue scrubs, looking nervous and clutching a tablet to her chest.

"Oh! Hi, sorry to interrupt, I was looking for—" She stopped mid-sentence when she spotted the room's occupants. "Dr. Pei! I'm so sorry, I didn't know you were in a meeting."

Xie Lian leaned forward slightly to get a better look. It was her. The new nurse from Friday night.

"I'm looking for Dr. Hua," she said. "Do you know where he might be?"

Of course she was looking for Hua Cheng. They always were. The new nurses especially. Drawn to the tall, imposing trauma surgeon with his eye patch that made people think he was dangerous in all the appealing ways. All these nurses and their sudden need for "clarification" on perfectly clear orders.

Shi Qingxuan looked around the room, even glancing up at the ceiling as though he might find Hua Cheng hanging from the light fixtures. "Uh, dunno. But not here!"

"Well, do you know where he *might* be?" she pressed. "I really need to ask him something about—"

"He's not single if that's what you're looking for," Xie Lian said.

Everyone—Shi Qingxuan, Pei Ming, He Xuan, and the nurse—turned to stare at him with varying degrees of shock.

"I—what? No, I just needed to clarify something about a patient's post-op orders—"

Without a word, Xie Lian pushed past the nurse and stalked out of the room. His footsteps clipped down the hallway. The overhead fluorescents flickered once, catching in his periphery as if the building's nerves misfired along with his own. White sheets of chemical light, their humming layered over a hundred beeping monitors downstairs. And didn't the corridor reek today? Of betadine, dried sweat, blue nitrile powder? There was something between his teeth, like the shame you get after biting the inside of your cheek too hard; pink-gum pain, swelling up his sinuses. His reflection skated across the LED-bleached glass of an anesthesia trolley and the question surfaced again: *Who was even in this skin?*

He was losing his fucking mind. Completely fucking losing it. Snapping at innocent nurses, yelling at friends, acting like some possessive—

Innocent nurse.

The thought stopped him right there in the middle of the hallway. Someone brushed past him with an annoyed huff, but he barely noticed.

Innocent? She'd nearly killed a patient her first week at the hospital. She'd wept squeaky and loud in the broom closet near Xie Lian's office, hands cupped useless around her mouth ("I just—I mixed up the lines—he was seizing—they'll fire me!").

She'd made her incompetence everyone else's problem to solve. And now she was what—rehabilitated? Color back in her knuckles? Yes, ready to flutter her eyelashes at the next doctor who caught her fancy.

Some distant, reasonable part of his mind whispered, *She's probably just trying to do her job.*

But the louder voice—the one that sounded suspiciously like Jun Wu—cut through that pathetic attempt at rationality: *You should have fired her when you had the chance. Now look what she's doing. Going after your—*

San Lang was his. As purely his as anything could be. They were dating, living together, building something. Their laundry mountains and mismatched chopsticks thrown into the utensil drawer; flower-print dish towels and soy sauce accumulating in the fridge door, long hair wrapped around the shower drain, a busted umbrella near the entrance that neither of them had the heart to throw away. Grocery lists. The worn, coppery coins piled in the change bowl, a city's worth of cab fare never spent.

San Lang: the only thing in his junk drawer life of stolen napkins and ketchup packets and expired hope worth holding up to the light and saying *mine.* The only thing that made him feel human instead of a collection of mistakes and inconveniences.

And now some little nurse with wide eyes thought she could just waltz in?

Over my fucking dead body.

His keycard took three swipes before the lock clicked open. He dropped into his office chair and powered up his computer, squinting into its light.

To: Director Jun Wu

Re: Personnel Recommendation - Employee #4847

Director Jun Wu,

Following my review of recent performance metrics and incident reports, I'm writing to recommend immediate termination of Employee #4847. The medication error during the first week resulted in a patient seizure and required emergency intervention. Additional monitoring and potential liability exposure represent the kind of financial drain we've been working to eliminate.

Employee #4847's performance continues to show concerning patterns. She requires excessive supervision, frequently seeks "clarification" on standard procedures, and demonstrates uncertainty that poses ongoing risk to both patient safety and operational efficiency.

I believe termination of Employee #4847 would be a prudent cost-saving measure that aligns with our current budgetary objectives.

Best regards,

Xie Lian

He hit send and watched the email disappear into the void. The office didn't change: paper stacks, battered pen cup, halogen's ugly glare, but he'd closed someone's future in a paragraph. Someone would be summoned, asked questions, and fired, simply because he had willed it. One life tipped out. A rush of power spiked through his blood. No one had given him this authority, least

of all the hospital, which preferred him decorative, quiet, ghostly in the daylight hours, adapting to friction rather than causing it. He'd expected to feel panic after sending that email, but instead it was resinous and potent, peach liquor sticky on his gums.

Then: "AAAAAAHHHHHHH CORPORATE SCUUUUUUM!"

The ungodly shrieking was back. Xie Lian looked up from his computer to see the Cybertruck pulling back into the parking lot, and there, still clinging to the roof like a barnacle, was Qi Rong.

Except now he had a child strapped to his back.

An actual child. No older than five, secured in what appeared to be an infant carrier that was definitely not designed for a kid that size. How he'd managed to stuff the child into it, or where he'd even obtained said child, was beyond comprehension.

"SEE! SEE!" Qi Rong shrieked, pointing wildly while keeping his death grip on the roof. "CHILD ENDANGERMENT! YOU'RE LIABLE FOR CHILD ENDANGERMENT NOW!”

The child, inexplicably, seemed to be enjoying the ride.

"AHAHAHAHAHA!" Qi Rong's laugh spiraled into something that sounded like a dying hyena. "AHAHAHAHA YOU'RE FUCKED NOW AHAHAHAHA!"

Xie Lian stared out his window, wondering if he was having a stress-induced hallucination.

Jun Wu stepped out of the truck and smiled. Polite. Professional. "Mr. Qi," he called up pleasantly, like he was greeting an old friend at a barbecue. "I see you've brought a guest."

"GUEST? I FOUND HIM WANDERING AROUND THE CHIPOTLE PARKING LOT!"

"Ah," Jun Wu nodded thoughtfully. "Well, these things happen."

He reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out his phone.

"I should probably call Child Protective Services. Let them know we have an unaccompanied minor and an adult who appears to have unlawfully restrained said minor to his person."

Qi Rong's laughter cut off. "WHAT? NO! I WAS TRYING TO —HE WAS ALONE!"

"Of course you were," Jun Wu said gently, still typing. "I'm sure they'll understand completely when they hear you strapped a random child to your back and rode around town on the roof of a moving vehicle."

Qi Rong went completely still. Then he launched himself off the Cybertruck's roof and hit the asphalt running.

"NOPE! NOPE NOPE NOPE!" he shrieked, sprinting across the parking lot with the child swinging and bouncing like a loose backpack. The kid was laughing delightedly, tiny hands gripping Qi Rong's hair like reins.

***

Xie Lian lay in bed, repositioning his pillow for the hundredth, maybe thousandth, time. He stared ceilingward where shadow puddled like dirty water in each corner. Rolling over, he pressed his back to San Lang's and matched their breathing to test for symmetry; it felt, briefly, as if he absorbed that borrowed air into his own chest.

Nights like these rendered the city to papier-mâché. Draped the apartment with something that blocked Xie Lian off so thoroughly he suspected the world outside might genuinely not exist. It was too possible: waking to a phone with no signal, no voices on the other side of the door. Nights like these, it barely mattered which red numbers slipped across the old digital clock because time became infinite.

He rolled over and burrowed into the shield of Hua Cheng's back. For half a minute he let himself pray that proximity could

somehow put San Lang's still-bodied peace into his own bones, but it only made him more restless. He retreated, flipping onto his back. *Huff*. The ceiling stared down at him, blank and expectant, as if waiting for him to project something meaningful onto its empty surface. Instead, his mind wandered in circles, picking up thoughts and setting them down again like a child rearranging toys: *Did we pay the gas? What was in my lunchbox? If my hair fell out, would he still love me? Is there something sharp in the washing machine? Why was it making that noise?*

What did San Lang do when he couldn't sleep? Did he lie still and patient? Or did he have nights like this too, where his body felt like it was humming at a frequency no one else could match?

Sighing, he swung his feet over cold floorboards and padded barefoot past clothes bundled over the chair. The kitchen felt just as inert and remote. Out the window, scattered lights still glowed—insomniacs like himself, perhaps, or shift workers making their way through the small hours of the night. It gave him less comfort than he'd hoped.

He opened the freezer and blinked into its gutted light. No joys there. He popped an ice cube into his mouth, rolling the numbness from one side of his mouth to the other.

***

The apartment smelled like Sichuan peppercorns and fermented black beans, the kind of numb warmth that should've made the membrane of Xie Lian's mouth tingle. In all these years, Sichuan had meant laughter and fiery lips and the orange discolor of chili oil striping up white ceramic. Hua Cheng had made mapo tofu for them. Four colors of red, hand-pulled noodles and pickled daikon in an earthenware jar—the closest thing to time travel.

He couldn't make himself eat. Instead he herded the tofu in elliptical traps, watching Hua Cheng scroll one-handed through his phone and eat with the other. Occasionally, he'd show Xie Lian a text from He Xuan about hospital management ("new policy: we're required to smile at patients. my face doesn't do that") or his Candy

Crush screenshots where he'd somehow reached level 3,847.

Xie Lian made appropriate noises: laughter, agreement murmurs, but his eyes began instead to lose their way out the window.

The city smudged to neutral, fetid clay. Shop signs lost color, became abstract blockings of dark and paler shadow. Someone moved barely visible; a swatch of fabric gone muddy with the half-night. All light leaned toward the world's edge, missing the street. Comfort—it had once been comfort. Now he felt the sun leeched out, replaced inside him by endless, endless counting—problems, debts, cut corners; everyone boiled down to ledger entries.

Working for Jun Wu had changed his relationships with people. Xie Lian used to lean into crowds, eager for their noise. He used to memorize the mouth shapes of people mid-dream, caught stories in chipped manicures clutching phone screens and deep voice notes playing so loud against a cheek, every quarrel and condolence audible. The hospital's elevator could offer whole bouts of lore if you listened: break-up mutterings, ladies arguing over the merits of Tiger Balm, residents bellyaching about ramen brands. Mop in hand, he'd watch mothers sheltering sons with foot-warmed soda bottles. To each he offered what he could, like hot water from the staff kettle slipped in a tea flask between his maintenance rounds.

He looked down at the city: no individuals greeted him back, nothing but abstracted motion. Unsalvageable grey.

Under the table, Hua Cheng's foot searched blindly for Xie Lian's ankle. "What's up? Do you not like the food? I can make something else."

His fingers on the table twitched as if he meant to reach across and draw their plates together, just for the closeness.

"No, it's perfect." Xie Lian set down his chopsticks with a soft click. "San Lang, I need to tell you something."

Hua Cheng set his phone aside and sat upright. Xie Lian,

then, leaned back. Hua Cheng was so openly attentive it felt that he might peel Xie Lian open.

"I..." His throat ran dry. Beneath the table: sock-soft exchanges.

How to talk? What to tell? All of it? Just part of it?

It was possible, even now, to turn away from this cliff. He drew circles unconsciously on the underside of the table with his index finger, rehearsing half-lies in the safe theater of his inner voice: laugh gently, give San Lang nothing more than a minor complaint about work. He imagined saying, "I just thought about the market again. The fish vendor was shouting at sparrows." Something meaningless. Let San Lang look at him fondly and tilt his head.

Heat climbed him tenderly, then recklessly. He tried to organize his hands, unaware they fidgeted. He felt suddenly monstrous under mute lamplight. But he had to say something. Truth in his throat, fear chasing up behind it. He pressed his foot over Hua Cheng's, again and again.

This, at least, was a way back into the room. Out of the grey.

"I'm embezzling money from the hospital. I've been doing it for months now. Creating fake vendor accounts like Meridian Medical Consulting—" He stopped, sucking in a deep breath and dragging his hands down his face. "God, it's so stupid. So fucking stupid. I've been inflating consulting fees for services that don't exist."

A hysterical laugh bubbled up from his chest. "Can you believe it? I can't—that no one even questions the shit being billed. I've been moving money around in the budget allocations, making it look like legitimate expenditures when really it's just… it's just theft!" His jaw jittered.

"And then the other day—" He pressed the heels of his palms against his eyes until he saw phosphenes, those bright dancing spots that flickered like dying stars. "The other day I sent Jun Wu a report

to get a new nurse fired. She came in looking for you, I thought she was flirting, and I just—I lost it. Wrote this cruel, pointless retaliation. I'm ashamed, San Lang. Of who I'm letting myself become.

"And I can't stop. Jun Wu—he keeps promising me all these things: medical school, licensing, all my sunk years back. At first, I thought it doesn't matter, I'll abandon the dream. But I do care, I miss surgery so fucking much. I watch you, and—" His voice broke and choked. "—I envy it. I'm so jealous watching you do the work you love every day while I just—what am I even doing?"

His eyes drifted, unfocused, to the runnels of sauce congealing on his plate, then to his hands as if seeing them for the first time: slim wrists, chewed fingernails, thumbs nervously flexing in and out of his fists. "What's my purpose? Why these hands, San Lang, why can't I use them for what they were made for? I've stolen so much money. Don't ask me the amount, I could tell you to the fraction. I have to know every penny or it eats at me even worse. Like it'll make this seem less out of control if I know it down to the decimal points."

He tried to laugh again, but it dissolved into a wet cough. "I keep telling myself it's temporary. That it's just one more fabrication, or that I'll get out before anyone knows. But every time I submit another fake report, every time I say yes to one more request? I'm deeper in. I can't breathe. I can't sleep. It's like—I lie awake night after night, rewriting the same lie to myself until even the inside of my head sounds like him. My bones are tired. But I keep moving through it, and I'm so fucking scared it's going to eat through everything I am before it ends."

He dragged his hands through his hair, fingers trembling in the roots, pulling tight until his scalp smarted. "And it all started because Jun Wu is threatening your medical license. He has connections with the medical board, San Lang. He said he could destroy your career if I didn't cooperate." His breath shuddered. "And he's blackmailing me about what happened in China."

He slumped forward, his stomach a hot held knot.

"I'm sorry, San Lang. I'm sorry. I—"

"Gege."

"San Lang—please… I love you. I'm so happy with you. You know—I mean, actually happy, in a way I never—" He broke off, knuckles pressed to his lips. "I don't want you to look at me any different after this."

Hua Cheng pulled his chair over to Xie Lian's side and sat. He reached out and coaxed Xie Lian's hands from their knot against his chest. He rubbed the backs of those knuckles with his thumbs.

"The one standing in infinite glory is you," he said. "The one fallen from grace is also you." He squeezed Xie Lian's hands. "What matters to me is 'you.' Not the state of you."

Xie Lian peered out from under the food cart's yellow tarp, watching the low-slung clouds of smog dragged down by the rain. It was June—monsoon season. The rain was starting again: first a sprinkle, then all at once, like coins hurled at the hot pavement, stinking of scorched dust and exhaust.

Two nurses passed by—"It's not done yet?" "The weather's gone insane."—wiping sweat from their upper lips with the hems of their scrubs, sidestepping the reek of stagnant drainage puddles. Steam hissed and collected on the underside of the tarp before sliding off in greasy trails. The vendor boxed up three orders: cold noodles with chili oil and slivered cucumber, two bowls of mala tang heavy on lotus root and spam, and a single guo kui, its sesame-studded crust blistered to hell. One for him, the noodles probably for Mu Qing, and the soupy mess for Feng Xin, who'd gripe about the spice and eat it anyway.

Three mopeds tore past the alley mouth, sending up curtains of water and making the tarp lurch on its poles. The vendor swatted at a fly, missed, and muttered, "That thing's never worked," glaring at the bug zapper strung from a power cord overhead. It stuttered once—*kzz*—then went dark again. It'd been jerry-rigged to one of the tarp poles with duct tape, and its heat had melted a hole clean through the plastic sometime in a past season.

The vendor handed him the plastic bag with their lunch, steam fogging the inside of the containers. "Next time bring your umbrella, doctor," he said, eyeing Xie Lian's soaked scrubs. "Rain's going to get worse before it gets better."

Xie Lian nodded his thanks and ducked back into the downpour. The hospital's automatic doors wheezed open, releasing a blast of frigid air conditioning that made his wet clothes cling to his skin.

"Dr. Xie!"

He turned to find a nurse waving him over to the charge desk. Behind her, the patient board was lit up like a Christmas tree: red squares indicating critical cases, yellow for urgent, and precious

few greens for stable patients.

"We've got a problem," she said. "The Li boy, bed seven in neuro ICU. His ICP's spiking again. Reading 35 and climbing."

Li Wei, the 19-year-old whose subdural hematoma he'd evacuated three days ago.

"What's his GCS?" Xie Lian asked, setting the lunch bag on the counter.

"Dropped from 15 to 10 in the last two hours. Left pupil's starting to dilate again."

Xie Lian closed his eyes, running through the possibilities. Rebleeding from an incompletely secured bridging vein. Delayed cerebral edema. Post-operative hematoma formation.

"Get him to CT," he said, moving toward the elevators. "Call the OR, start mannitol, hyperventilate the patient, and get his parents here."

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When he arrived, the neuro ICU was, as usual, bedlam. The patient lay unconscious in bed seven.

"When did it start?" Xie Lian asked one of the nurses adjusting ventilator settings.

"About three hours ago. He was doing well this morning. Alert, following commands, asked for water. Then around noon he complained of a severe headache, became nauseated, and his level of consciousness started declining."

"CT results?"

"Just came back." She pulled up the images on the workstation. "Large reaccumulation of subdural blood, midline shift of 12 millimeters to the right. Looks like one of the bridging veins let loose."

Xie Lian studied the scans. The subdural space—which he'd cleared during the first emergency surgery—was filled with fresh blood. The brain was being squeezed against the skull all over again.

"Where are Feng Xin and Mu Qing?"

"Already scrubbing in. OR three is ready when you are."

Xie Lian nodded and headed for the surgical suite. In the scrub room, he found Feng Xin working soap up his forearms while Mu Qing counted instruments through the glass partition.

"Same approach as last time?" Feng Xin asked.

"Through the original incision. Should be straightforward. Just need to evacuate the blood and identify the bleeding source." Xie Lian began his own scrub. "Probably a bridging vein that didn't hold."

"Blood products available?" Mu Qing called from the OR.

"Two units cross-matched and ready," came the reply from the circulating nurse.

The patient was positioned and draped when Xie Lian entered. The anesthesiologist gave him a quick rundown of vital signs. ICP elevated but manageable, pupils reactive but sluggish. Xie Lian made his incision along the previous line, then lifted the bone flap to reveal the dura bulging with blood.

"How much do you think?" Feng Xin asked, prepping suction.

"Based on the CT, maybe 120 to 150 milliliters." Xie Lian opened the dura carefully. What emerged was almost tarry—clotted, deep maroon, oozing past his retractor: a hemorrhage long cooled.

"There's our culprit," he said, pointing to a cluster of bridging veins along the parasagittal region. One had clearly torn loose from its previous repair site. "Bipolar forceps."

The coagulation took only minutes. Under the operating microscope, he sealed the bleeding vessel and reinforced two adjacent veins that looked tenuous. The brain tissue underneath appeared healthy—pink and pulsatile with good perfusion.

"ICP's normalizing," the anesthesiologist reported. "Down to 18 and stable."

"Good. Let's irrigate and close." Xie Lian flushed the subdural space with warm saline, checking for additional bleeding sources. Finding none, he began closure: dura, bone flap, skin.

"Forty-five minutes," Mu Qing announced as Xie Lian placed the final skin sutures.

"Not bad for a second look." Xie Lian stepped back from the table, stripping off his gloves. "Same post-op orders as before. Neuro ICU monitoring, serial neurological checks."

The patient was already beginning to stir as they transferred him to the recovery gurney, a good sign that the decompression had been effective. In the hallway, a nurse intercepted them.

"Parents want to know when they can see him," she said.

"Give it an hour. Let him wake up properly first." Xie Lian checked his watch. 2:30 PM. His afternoon surgery was scheduled for 4:00, giving him time to grab something to eat and review the operative images.

Back in the break room, their lunch had achieved room temperature equilibrium. Feng Xin poked at his mala tang skeptically.

"Cold spicy noodles," he said. "That's a new one."

"Still edible," Mu Qing replied, halfway through his portion.

Xie Lian's phone buzzed with a message from the ICU: *Patient awake and oriented x3. Following commands.*

"He's doing well," Xie Lian said, showing them the text. "Should be back to baseline in a day or two."

"Rebleeds usually do better than primary injuries," Feng Xin said, taking a bite of his noodles and immediately reaching for water. "Wow, that's spicy."

"You order it every time," Mu Qing pointed out.

"And I'm surprised every time."

Xie Lian checked his schedule on the computer terminal. The afternoon case was a routine meningioma resection, a 45-year-old teacher with a slow-growing tumor that had, at last, gotten large enough to cause symptoms. Straightforward surgery, good prognosis, minimal risk of complications.

"What time do you finish today?" he asked the others.

"Last case ends around six," Feng Xin replied. "Unless an emergency comes in."

"Want to grab dinner after? That Sichuan place near the medical school?"

Mu Qing nodded. "As long as Feng Xin doesn't order the mapo tofu again."

"It wasn't that spicy—"

"You cried. Literally cried."

"My eyes were watering from the steam."

"Steam," Mu Qing repeated flatly. "Right. Steam that somehow only affected you and not the rest of the restaurant."

"I have sensitive eyes!"

"You have a sensitive everything. Last week you complained the air conditioning was too cold."

"It was freezing in OR two. Even Dr. Lao mentioned it."

"Dr. Lao is seventy years old. His circulation stopped working during the Cultural Revolution."

Feng Xin wadded up his napkin and threw it at Mu Qing, who dodged without looking up from his phone. "At least I don't spend twenty minutes arranging my instruments in alphabetical order before every case."

"It's called organization. You should try it sometime instead of just grabbing whatever's closest."

"I grab what I need when I need it."

"Yesterday you handed Dr. Xie a Kelly clamp when he asked for forceps."

"They're both clamps!"

"They're completely different instruments, Feng Xin. One has teeth, one doesn't. One's for grasping tissue, one's for clamping vessels—"

"I know what they're for. I was in a hurry."

Xie Lian smiled, watching them volley back and forth while finishing the last of his guo kui.

"Speaking of organization," Mu Qing continued, "your locker looks like a tornado hit it. There are surgical masks from 2015 in there. It's 2019!"

"How do you know what's in my locker?"

"Because every time you open it, half the contents fall out and I have to help you pick them up."

"That happened once—"

"Twice this week."

"Fine! Twice! But *your* locker is so organized it's unsettling."

"My scrubs are arranged by rotation schedule. Light blue for general surgery days, dark blue for neuro, green for trauma—"

"See? Unsettling."

Xie Lian's pager buzzed. "Pre-op assessment." He stood up. "Try not to kill each other while I'm gone."

He was halfway down the corridor when he heard a chair scraping violently across linoleum, followed by a muffled thud.

"—don't you dare—"

Another crash, this time something hitting the floor. Through the break room's small window, he caught a glimpse of Feng Xin putting Mu Qing in a headlock. A vending machine rattled. Someone's shoe squeaked against the tile. There was a brief moment of silence, then what must have been a small table being overturned.

Xie Lian sighed and kept walking.

***

The on-call room was blessedly quiet. Xie Lian had finished the meningioma resection an hour ago. Now, he had a precious two-hour window before evening rounds, and his body was demanding payment in sleep. He'd barely closed his eyes when his phone rang. The ring tone—a cheerful melody his mother had programmed into his phone the last time he visited home—twisted its jabby little fingers into his temples.

"Hi, mama."

"A-Lian, have you eaten? You sound weak. Your voice has no energy."

Xie Lian smiled, exhausted. "I just woke up from a nap."

"Sleeping in the afternoon? Ai, this is what happens when you don't regulate your schedule properly. Your body's internal clock is all wrong. Are you eating cooling foods in this heat? The weather reports say Wuhan is like a furnace. You need winter melon soup, bitter gourd, something to clear the heat from your system."

"Mama—"

"And those vitamins I sent—the American ones are too harsh for Chinese bodies. You need the ginseng. All this surgery work depletes your essence. Are you taking it?"

"Mm."

"I know that sound. You think you can fool your mother? I carried you for nine months—I know when you're lying." She paused. "I'm sending more herbal tea. And dried dates for your blood."

"The hospital has food, mama. I eat properly."

"Properly," she repeated skeptically. "Your father works too much too. Grading papers until midnight, reading those political journals until his eyes are red. I tell him, 'What's the use of all this knowledge if you make yourself sick?' But does he listen? Both of you, the same stubborn streak."

"How is he?"

"Busy with his courses. That visiting scholar from Beijing keeps scheduling meetings. Very important man, apparently. Your father mentioned you to Professor Chang last week. You know, his son is starting medical school."

Of course. Everything filtered through professional connections.

"Your father said neurosurgery requires political awareness because of the high-profile cases. Hospital politics, department relationships… He thinks you should be more strategic about your

reputation. Publishing papers, making the right connections."

"Mm."

"Anyway," she continued, "Mrs. Gui from my office has been asking about you. Her husband works at that textile factory. You know, the big one near the river. He's been sick for weeks."

"What kind of sick?"

"Coughing, coughing, never stops. Even after the fever went down. Mrs. Gui dragged him to the clinic. You know how men are about doctors. The doctor took pictures of his lungs and sent him to the big hospital."

"What did they find?"

"Some white spots, she said. The doctor used big medical words she didn't understand. Several workers from his shift have been sick. Maybe ten, fifteen people. The factory thinks it's the new air system they installed."

"That's unusual."

"That's what I said. Mrs. Gui is worried about her grandchildren. They all live in the same compound." She paused. "Your father thinks people make too much of every little cough these days. Says they watch too much news about diseases and panic."

"Maybe."

"Ai, I hope so. Remember SARS? What a nightmare that was. When are you coming home? It's been two months. Your father asks about you, you know. He doesn't say it, but he worries."

His pager buzzed. Emergency consult in the ED.

"Mama, I have to go. Work emergency."

"Ai ya, always working! Listen to me. Wash your hands

properly, not just a quick rinse. Use soap, hot water. And eat something with rice tonight, not just those Western sandwiches."

"I will."

"Call me this weekend. Don't make me worry."

"I'll call."

***

The emergency department was busier than usual. Xie Lian made his way through the maze of gurneys and IV poles to find the patient he'd been called to see. A 60-year-old construction worker who'd fallen from scaffolding and hit his head.

"Where's the CT?" he asked the emergency physician, Dr. Wang.

"That's the problem," Dr. Wang said, looking frazzled. "The machine's been down for two hours."

Xie Lian frowned. "What happened this time?"

"Same issue. The cooling system keeps failing. We put in a maintenance request weeks ago, but it has to go through procurement, then get approved by the medical equipment committee, then they have to find an authorized repair company..." Dr. Wang shrugged helplessly. "Meanwhile, we're sending patients to Zhongnan Hospital for scans, but they're getting backed up too."

They walked over to the patient's bed where the man was conscious but drowsy, his wife growing increasingly anxious as the hours dragged on.

"When will he get his test?" she asked.

"Soon," Dr. Wang replied. "We're working on it."

A frustrated nurse approached with a clipboard. "Dr. Wang, the ambulance from Hankou is asking where to bring the stroke

patient. Zhongnan says they're backed up for two hours."

Dr. Wang sighed. "Any news on our backup unit?"

"Still waiting for approval to move it from storage. Apparently, we need the department head's signature, but he's in Beijing for a conference."

"How long for the repair?" Xie Lian asked.

"The technician says he can fix it in an hour once he gets the replacement part. But the part has to be ordered through the hospital's approved suppliers, which could take days," Dr. Wang said.

They were interrupted by shouting from the main corridor. Through the doorway, Xie Lian could see a crowd of patients and families clustered around the elevators, which weren't moving.

"What now?" Dr. Wang muttered.

A maintenance worker approached, wiping grease from his hands. "Both main elevators are stuck. The service contract expired last month, and they're still negotiating with the maintenance company. Something about government procurement regulations."

"How are we supposed to get patients upstairs?"

"Freight elevator's working, but it's slow. And the stairs, I guess." The worker shrugged. "I put in the repair request, but you know how it is."

Guoshi appeared at Xie Lian's elbow, unimpressed. "The pharmacy computer system crashed again. We're filling prescriptions by hand, but it's taking forever. Patients have been waiting three hours for discharge medications."

"Can you restart the system?" Dr. Wang asked.

"IT department says they're working on it, but the hospital's contract with the software company expired, so they can't get

technical support. They're trying to fix it themselves."

"What about the new equipment we ordered last year?" Xie Lian asked, remembering hearing something about modernization plans.

"Still in storage," Guoshi replied flatly. "The installation requires approval from the fire department, the health commission, and three other agencies. Each one wants different documentation, and they don't communicate with each other so we've been waiting months."

A commotion near the nurses' station caught their attention. Several patients were complaining loudly about the heat. The air conditioning had failed in half the department.

"Let me guess," Xie Lian said. "Maintenance contract issue?"

Guoshi wrinkled his nose. "Actually, no. The maintenance request was approved two weeks ago, but accounting never processed the payment to the repair company."

Xie Lian stared at him. "What's happening? Why is everything falling apart all of a sudden?"

"Sudden?" Guoshi barked a laugh. "Dr. Xie, this has been building for months. It's just reached the point where we can't ignore it anymore."

"What do you mean?"

Guoshi glanced around, then lowered his voice. "The administration and finance departments are hemorrhaging staff. We lost half the accounting team in the past three months. They all left for better positions at private hospitals or government offices."

"Why?"

"Same reason everyone's leaving. Overwork, underpay, and no one wants to deal with the stress anymore."

Xie Lian blinked slow in the drift of noise. He couldn't pick apart all the voices: med students double-checking dosages, a child wailing about her lost shoes, someone arguing about prescriptions. Even pink-labeled sanitizer couldn't cut the grease of fried garlic from someone's lunch in the staff break room. He squeezed his eyes shut, letting static fizz in the darkness, then rubbed his eyelids until they pulsed red, insomnia teething on his optic nerves.

There was a part of him, exhaustion-striped, that clung to helping. That's why he'd become a surgeon in the first place, right? And if not to fix something outright, then spot-fix the drip of breakdowns.

Maybe he could cover some basic functions: accounts payable, vendor relations. Maybe assist with budget reconciliation. How complicated could it be? Numbers were numbers. Contracts had terms. Someone just needed to process them.

He opened his eyes. "What if I helped out temporarily? With the finance department."

Guoshi stopped mid-paperwork shuffle, looking at Xie Lian as though he'd just announced intent to perform his own appendectomy. "I'm sorry?"

"Just until you can hire replacements. I could handle accounts payable, maybe some procurement oversight—"

"You want to do accounts payable. You. A neurosurgeon. Want to spend your time processing vendor invoices."

"It's temporary. And it's affecting patient care."

"Dr. Xie, do you have any idea what accounts payable actually involves? Tax documentation, compliance audits, vendor verification, payment authorization workflows—"

"I can learn the systems."

"The systems?" Guoshi's voice rose. "You think this is just learning some software? Do you know what happens if you

miscategorize medical equipment purchases? Or process a payment without proper requisition approval? Or file tax forms incorrectly?"

"I'm methodical. I pay attention to detail."

"You pay attention to detail when you're removing brain tumors! That's completely different from reconciling general ledger accounts or managing cash flow projections. Dr. Xie, this is insane. You're talking about doing financial administration work on top of a full surgical schedule."

"Just a few hours a week—"

"No, it's not just a few hours a week. It's the same arrogance that makes doctors think because they're intelligent in one area, they can master any area." Guoshi's voice was getting snippier. "You spend years learning neurosurgery because it's complex and specialized. Financial administration is also complex and specialized."

Xie Lian was quiet for a long time, his thoughts threading back and forth. "I understand what you're saying," he said finally.

Guoshi's shoulders relaxed. "Good. I'm glad you're being reasonable about this."

"Mm." Xie Lian nodded. "I should get back to my patients."

"Yes, that's where you're needed most."

Xie Lian turned to leave, but paused as if remembering something. "Guoshi, which department would handle hiring for finance or administrative positions?"

Guoshi's eyes narrowed to a warning. "Why?"

"Just curious about the process. Since it seems to be taking so long."

"Dr. Xie—"

"I was wondering if there might be ways to streamline things. Make suggestions to whoever's in charge."

"Don't."

But Xie Lian was already walking away.

***

Xie Lian sat across from a desk where a neat stack of papers waited for his signature, each page flagged with yellow sticky notes marking the relevant lines.

"It's unusual," the HR coordinator admitted, sliding the papers toward him. "But the Internal Audit Director approved your request to pick up our slack."

Xie Lian picked up the first form. Standard employment documentation, but with addendums he'd never seen before: liability waivers, scope limitation clauses, emergency reassignment protocols.

"All this just to help with accounts payable?"

"Director's orders. Everything has to be properly documented." She pointed to a signature line at the bottom. "That's where Internal Audit signed off on the arrangement."

Xie Lian squinted at the signature: a crisp "W.N.F." He'd seen those initials on hospital documents over the years for budget approvals, audit reports, and policy changes, but now that he thought about it, he'd never actually met the person behind them.

"Has anyone ever actually seen this Internal Audit Director?" he asked, half-joking.

The coordinator laughed nervously. "Oh, you know how some people are. Always working behind closed doors." She tapped the papers. "But his approval matters, so if he says you're cleared for administrative duties, that's good enough."

Xie Lian picked up the pen and started signing the first form. "It's almost like he's a ghost, isn't it? All these signatures but no actual person."

"A very productive ghost," the coordinator replied, sorting through the remaining papers. "His department processes more paperwork than anyone else in the hospital."

"Maybe that's the secret to efficiency. Become invisible so no one can bother you with questions." Xie Lian signed another page, then paused. "What does W.N.F. stand for?"

"You know, I've worked here for three years and I honestly don't know. Someone told me once but I forgot." She shrugged. "Everyone just calls the department 'Internal Audit' and leaves it at that."

"Very mysterious." Xie Lian continued signing, finding the whole situation amusing. "Invisible directors, missing signatures, paperwork that appears and disappears..."

"Well, as long as the ghost approves your administrative position, I'm happy." The coordinator gathered the completed forms. "Though between you and me, I've always wondered what his office looks like. Third floor, end of the hall, but the door's always closed."

"Maybe I should stop by and thank him personally."

She laughed. "Good luck with that."

***

The finance department at 3 AM was a fluorescent-lit purgatory of empty cubicles and humming computers. Xie Lian sat hunched over a desk that wasn't his, squinting at a spreadsheet that might as well have been written in hieroglyphics. Two months into this work and everything still felt foreign. Vendor codes, purchase order references, budget line items—they all blurred into an incomprehensible soup of data. He'd finished his last surgery at 11 PM, a complex aneurysm repair that had taken four hours, followed

by post-op monitoring until the patient was stable. Now he was trying to reconcile pharmaceutical invoices, and his brain felt like it was operating through molasses.

"Invoice 47291... corresponds to purchase order..." He rubbed his eyes, leaving them gritty and dry. The purchase order number on the screen looked familiar, but he'd been staring at similar numbers for two hours straight. Everything looked familiar at this point.

His tea had gone cold somewhere around invoice 30, but at least his pager had been mercifully quiet for the past hour.

The stack of paper beside his keyboard seemed to grow larger every time he looked at it. Each one required verification against purchase orders, budget codes, and delivery confirmations. Simple enough in theory; however, half the purchase orders were filed incorrectly with codes that didn't match between systems. He tried to focus on a purchase order. Was that a 7 or a 1? His vision was starting to double.

Somewhere in the distance, a floor buffer hummed its way down the corridor. Its round, dull whine edged in and out of hearing as if underwater, rising against the softer thrum of ventilation ducts and server fans. Underneath, linoleum gave off that faint undercurrent of ammonium and old mop water, the sort of astringency that never meant "clean," only "recently fussed with."

His phone buzzed.

Feng Xin [3:17 AM]

Still at hospital? Saw your car in parking lot.

Xie Lian [3:18 AM]

Working on some administrative things.

Feng Xin [3:18 AM]

You're insane. Go home.

Xie Lian stared at the screen, then back at the invoice in hand. The vendor code started with "MED-" but the corresponding purchase order was filed under "PHARM-.” Either someone had miscategorized the original order, or the invoice was wrong, or both systems were using different classification standards.

His phone buzzed again.

Feng Xin [3:21 AM]

Seriously.

He picked up the next invoice. "Wuhan Surgical Instruments Ltd." Purchase order number... where was the purchase order number? He flipped the paper over, checked the second page, then started searching through the database again. Twenty minutes passed in a haze of clicking through dropdown menus and cross-referencing codes that led nowhere.

The sound of footsteps bounced down the corridor. Security guard making rounds, probably. Xie Lian hunched deeper over his paperwork, but then the footsteps stopped outside his door.

"Dr. Xie, I can see you in there."

Xie Lian looked up to find Feng Xin standing in the doorway, holding a plastic bag that smelled like hot food and wearing an expression torn between concern and homicide.

"How did you—the department doors are locked after hours."

"I told security I was bringing you emergency medical supplies." Feng Xin held up the bag. "Technically not a lie. You look like you're having a medical emergency."

He approached the desk and set the bag down. Containers of still-warm noodles and soup from the 24-hour place near the hospital. "When's the last time you ate something?"

Xie Lian couldn't actually remember. "I'm fine."

"You look like a medical resident during finals week." Feng Xin peered at the screen. "What is this?"

"Accounts payable. I'm trying to match invoices with purchase orders so we can actually pay our vendors."

Feng Xin stared at him.

"Someone has to," Xie Lian said.

"Someone who knows how to do bookkeeping has to." Feng Xin opened one of the containers, releasing the smell of beef broth and green onions. "Eat this before you pass out."

Xie Lian picked up the chopsticks, realizing his hands were shakier than they should be. The first bite of noodles tasted better than anything had in hours. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. Just eat." Feng Xin settled into the chair across from him, looking around at the stacks of paperwork and folders. "How's Mu Qing handling you disappearing into accounting hell?"

"He thinks I've lost my mind."

"He's not wrong." Feng Xin frowned. "Actually, speaking of Mu Qing, his mother's been sick for the past week. Some kind of respiratory thing that won't go away."

Xie Lian looked up from his noodles. "Respiratory infection?"

"That's what they think. Persistent cough, low-grade fever. She went to the clinic for antibiotics, but it's not really clearing up."

Xie Lian set down his chopsticks, thinking. "I keep hearing about that. My mother mentioned something similar a few months ago."

"Probably just bad luck. You know how these things spread in crowds."

"What did the clinic say about Mu Qing's mother?"

"Standard treatment. Rest, fluids, finish the antibiotics. But she keeps getting worse instead of better. Mu Qing's been staying with her more, which is why he's been even more irritable than usual."

Xie Lian picked up his chopsticks again, but his appetite had dimmed. "How many people in her building are sick?"

"I don't know. Why?"

"Just curious." He took another bite, thinking about clusters and transmission patterns.

***

The infectious disease department's office looked like it had been hit by the same administrative plague affecting the rest of the hospital. Dr. Wang—no relation to the emergency physician also named Dr. Wang—sat behind a desk buried under stacks of case reports, looking like he hadn't slept in days.

"Respiratory clusters?" He looked up from a form he'd been filling out by hand. "Dr. Xie, you're a neurosurgeon. Why are you asking about respiratory clusters?"

"I keep hearing about cases. My colleague's mother, some factory workers. I was wondering if there's a pattern."

Dr. Wang gestured helplessly at his desk. "There might be. Hard to tell when our surveillance system has been down for three weeks."

"Down how?"

"The software that tracks communicable disease reports? The license expired and nobody renewed it because the person who handled vendor contracts quit." Dr. Wang pulled out a thick folder stuffed with paper forms. "We're back to manual reporting. I've got cases from the past month that I haven't been able to enter into any database."

"How do you track outbreaks manually?"

"You don't. You hope nothing serious happens while we're flying blind." Dr. Wang opened the folder, revealing dozens of handwritten reports. "I've been trying to spot patterns myself, but it's like doing epidemiology with stone tools."

"What patterns have you noticed?"

"Persistent respiratory symptoms that don't respond well to standard treatment. Mostly adults scattered across different areas of the city. Could be a new strain of something seasonal, could be environmental, could be nothing. Without proper data analysis tools, I'm just guessing."

Xie Lian leaned forward. "How many cases?"

"In the past two months? Maybe forty or fifty reports that fit the description. But that's just what's been reported to us directly. If other hospitals are seeing similar cases..."

"Other hospitals would report to you, wouldn't they?"

"In theory. But our inter-hospital communication system is also broken." Dr. Wang lowered his voice. "Actually, that's not entirely accurate."

Xie Lian frowned. "What do you mean?"

"The system isn't broken. It's been... restricted. New protocols came down from the health commission about a month ago. Something about streamlining reporting procedures and reducing redundant communications between facilities."

"Streamlining how?"

"All infectious disease reports have to go through a central review process now before being shared between hospitals. Takes weeks instead of days." Dr. Wang glanced at his door, looking fretful. "Officially, it's to improve data quality and prevent false alarms. Unofficially..."

"Unofficially?"

"Unofficially, I think someone upstairs is nervous about something. The new protocols make it difficult to see the bigger picture across multiple hospitals." Dr. Wang tapped the stack of paper reports. "These cases I'm seeing? I have no idea if other hospitals are seeing similar patterns."

It was as if someone had pressed a slab of cold metal right between Xie Lian’s ribs. Sudden, sinking doubt. "Why would they want to prevent hospitals from sharing information?"

"Could be bureaucratic attempts at efficiency. Could be concern about public panic if preliminary reports get misinterpreted. Could be that someone knows something we don't."

"What kind of something?"

"The kind that makes administrators nervous about hospitals comparing notes." Dr. Wang closed the folder of reports with a pissy snap. "Look, I don't know anything for certain, okay? But the timing is suspicious. These new protocols came down right around when I started noticing the respiratory case clusters."

"Have you reported the pattern to the health commission?"

"I submitted a preliminary observation report three weeks ago and I'm still waiting for approval to investigate further." Dr.

Wang's smile was grim. "Apparently, my request needs to be reviewed by multiple departments before I can officially recommend increased surveillance."

"They're preventing you from investigating a potential outbreak?"

"They're ensuring proper oversight of infectious disease investigations," Dr. Wang corrected, but his tone suggested he didn't believe it either.

"But if there's a pattern—"

"Dr. Xie." Dr. Wang's voice turned snippy. "I appreciate your concern, but I've been doing infectious disease work for fifteen years. I know how to identify concerning patterns, I know how to follow proper reporting protocols, and I know when to be worried."

Xie Lian blinked, looking thrown. "I wasn't suggesting—"

"You weren't suggesting what? That I don't know my job? That I'm not handling this correctly?" Dr. Wang leaned back in his chair. "Look, I understand you're trying to help, but wandering around asking questions about disease surveillance isn't actually helpful. It's just another distraction I don't need."

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"What you mean is irrelevant. What matters is that I have fifty case reports to process manually, no functional database, and now you questioning my competence." Dr. Wang spun his chair around with a sharp squeak of wheels, turning his back to Xie Lian and hunching over his paperwork. "Unless you have specific epidemiological training I'm not aware of, I suggest you stick to brain surgery and let me handle infectious disease monitoring."

Xie Lian stood up slowly, feeling stung. "Of course. I apologize for taking up your time."

"And while we're on the subject," Dr. Wang added, rifling through a new file, "I heard about your administrative volunteer

project. Word of advice? If you stretch yourself too thin trying to fix everyone else's problems, the neurosurgery department will end up in the same mess."

Xie Lian paused at the door. "What do you mean?"

"I mean when you're too exhausted from doing accounts to perform surgery properly, or when you miss an emergency case because you're buried in spreadsheets, your department will start falling apart too." Here, Dr. Wang finally looked up, his brows drawn low. "Then instead of one functioning department and several broken ones, we'll have all broken departments. And don't think it stops with neurosurgery. Orthopedics depends on you for spine cases. Is that really an improvement?"

"That won't happen."

"No? You think you can work eighteen-hour days indefinitely? Handle neurosurgery and financial administration without something giving way? You're not superhuman or a god, Dr. Xie. Hell, even if you were a god, I doubt you could single-handedly fix a drought. And when you burn out—not if, when—what happens to your patients?" He turned back to his reports, rapping his pen against them. "Just think about what you're actually solving versus what you might be breaking. Sometimes trying to fix everything ends up breaking everything."

The ceiling above Xie Lian glittered with static and vent-dust like starlight on asphalt. He woke tangled in call-room sheets, not sure if it was morning or just another forgetful hour diced out of continuity.

It was December now. He washed his mouth out in the nurses' sink, yet still tasted sleep's sour backwash and last night's over-the-counter paracetamol rescue. His phone, abandoned on the bedside drawer, shuddered. Five missed messages. Reminders for rounds, consults, administration. Then, immediately and forcibly, a reminder of how many milky sunrises he'd lost in this fugue of endless work.

Rounds, Xie Lian, he prioritized, lacing one shoe, then the other, taut as if it'll keep the flesh on his bones. *Start there.*

The ICU was so dense with disinfectant and IV-blue lull that he thought he might be breathing in ghosts of the night's visiting dead. He scrubbed at the nurses' station, badge barely registering on the ancient scanner. He pulled up labs, skimmed overnight vitals. GCS trends, ICP logs, blood panels, one after another, absorbed in blinks. Pupils brisk, pupils sluggish, pupils blown. Notes from the night team: reintubated bed three, sedated bed five for agitation, bed eight spiked a fever again.

He moved bed to bed. Checked dressings. Checked drains. Subgaleal pressure bulb holding at 14. Sutures intact. No signs of herniation. Another neuro check—"Squeeze my fingers. Good. Again." He scrolled through CTs on the wheeled terminal, trying not to squint too hard. No new midline shifts. Pneumocephalus in bed two resolving. Hydrocephalus in bed four stable for now, shunt scheduled for the afternoon. He left a voice note for the junior: delay extubation in six until neuro clears swallow.

He passed the ICU board again on his way out, eyes grazing it out of habit. Red tiles, yellow flags. Mostly respiratory, a few cardiac, one burn.

Then he saw the name: Li Wei, medical ICU.

He slowed, blinked once, recalibrating. That Li Wei? Nineteen, subdural bleed in June, walked out talking.

He doubled back and caught a nurse carrying a tray of medications.

"Li Wei in bed twelve," he whispered, careful not to disturb the bubbles of each patient's dying breath cycle. "What's he here for?"

The nurse didn't stop moving. Xie Lian followed her feet.

"Came in two nights ago," she said. "I think for fever and cough. O2 was low." She gave a tired shrug, sudsy traces of sanitizer tamped into her cuticles. "CT looks viral. They're running panels."

"Nothing so far?"

"Flu negative, RSV negative, mycoplasma negative. Cultures clean so far and not responding to antibiotics. We're shooting off notes to Infectious Disease but they keep calling it atypical pneumonia." She shook her head, shoes squeaking down the hallway.

Xie Lian stopped and looked down the hall. Bed twelve had a nurse in PPE adjusting tubing.

"I'm sorry you're back here," Xie Lian mumbled, and Li Wei's chest creaked proudly with each forced inhale through the thin nasal line of the Oxymizer.

More of them, he realized. There were others than just textile workers falling sick.

He waited outside the room until the nurse stripped her gown and binned it with a snap.

"You're in full PPE," he said softly. "Why isn't he under droplet or airborne precautions?"

The nurse blinked like she hadn't expected him to ask. "He's

in a private room. No confirmed pathogen, and protocol hasn't updated."

"But you're masking for it."

"It's precaution."

He frowned. "Precaution without isolation doesn't make sense though."

She glanced toward the room. "I agree, Dr. Xie. But until someone upstairs says otherwise, he's just another respiratory patient and to be treated as such."

A call two beds down: a monitor blip, then thunder and the swing of crisis. Someone yelled for compressions, and the nurse was gone, code cart screeching.

Xie Lian stayed put. Code teams moved best without extra hands, he knew that. The commotion down the ward flashed and bled through every other sound. Shoe squeal and static, the muted drum of someone striking a chest. Again, again. It made the dozens of quieter machines around the ICU seem silent and nursing collective surprise. Like bystanders after a crash, they seemed to hush and cup their hands around their mouths, watching.

He looked, again, into Li Wei's room. Wasn't it him who had called Xie Lian 'white stoat' that morning after surgery, smiling the brittle smile all young men wore after good luck intersected their lives?

(*"White stoat?"*

"They say weasels steal souls. You took me into surgery twice because you had to put mine back, yeah? And that doctor coat you wear? It's white.")

It would be dishonest to pretend those moments didn't reach Xie Lian. He half-smiled to himself.

We are only human, after all, not immortals. He repeated his

small, involuntary wish: that someday he would never see the same name twice on a plastic bracelet. That, for once, everyone he'd tended would simply go out into the softness of ordinary days, and stay there, whole, unremarkable, living far beyond these fluorescent hours.

***

January: soft cough rumors traded between N95 masks. The halls thinned daily. Pulmonologists vanished, ICU nurses stifled behind quarantine doors. PPE stock numbers talked about like the lottery.

The code bell shrilled. Two nurses were already bagging. One resident, who had only ever pulled manikins out for boards, panicked.

Xie Lian barreled into the room, momentum snagging on the cheap give of booties on linoleum. He could smell his own exhale, fog-thick and pulpy, inside the shell of his mask.

The resident's eyes on him, all whites: "I've never—"

"Watch and help."

Patient almost not a patient, just blue.

Mouth morning-glory blue, little bruise blue.

Color running to the edge of him—

He is falling, color falling, falling out of air.

"Lift his chin. I need suction!"

Sputum snapped in the tubing. Propofol snowed the lashes downward.

“Hold his jaw open. Pull back his lips—yes.”

Xie Lian got in close. He slid the curved metal tool, the laryngoscope, over the tongue and lifted it up. Needed to see the vocal cords, need a clear path. Light reflecting everywhere, but there: a tiny gap at the throat. The vocal cords, two pale lines.

“Bougie!” he barked.

Someone pressed a long, flexible plastic rod into his hand. He threaded it down the windpipe.

“Okay, now slide the breathing tube over the bougie,” he instructed the resident. The thin plastic tube hissed over the guide, past the teeth, past the tongue into shadow.

“Keep going… okay, stop—good. Pump up the tube’s balloon—there. Give a breath.”

A nurse squeezed the resuscitation bag. Xie Lian listened close, stethoscope pads cold atop the patient’s chest, left side, then right, for the soft rush that meant air.

Patient gathering himself from blue,

pink pushing out the night, plum to blossom.

Let color retake the mouth, let him return

he is falling into breath

(gently, now, let him stay)

Xie Lian ran through the checklist in his head, ending here: remember to breathe for yourself.

The alarm in the next pod blared.

“Dr. Xie, bed fifteen is desatting.”

He checked the tape anchoring the tube and pressed an ear to the dull thump of machine-delivered breath. “He’s stable—go.”

The resident’s arms shook: “Do I—should I rescrub, or go straight over—”

“Rescrub if you have time. If not, just do your best. Keep your mask tight.”

Nurses re-gowned in a rush of static, mask-ribbons pulling like puppet strings from flattened ears. Too dry in his mouth, tongue scraped chalk, hands forgetting how to relax as new alarms erupted two bays down. There was no going slower, only a shuffling trot and animal fear. Names and room numbers clamoring: this one crashing, that one gone febrile; histamine, O_2, remdesivir, a new round of coughs, another staff nurse lost for days, an X-ray tacked over the glass with static bubbles burned straight down the lungs. New fever charted, another story breaking in the lobby on someone’s phone, code blue, code blue, code blue. The next room was waiting, yawning open with need. Noise in his ears, heat in his light-starved blood. He wiped futilely at his mask for lip sweat. Again. Again. A bell and another bell. Sometimes they sounded for nothing, sometimes for someone becoming nobody.

How many hours was it now? Did it even matter? The call-room cot that never cooled, another five AM artificial sunrise. He wasn’t logged out, not from anything: neuro rounds folding into admin consults folding into another hallway stuffed with ER overflow. Don’t forget bed four’s labs. Don’t forget family texted twice. Consult, reduce ICP, batch orders for next shift, it’s just you again isn’t it. Give that lecture. Update the protocol you forgot to read. Pick up the neuro service. Pick up admin. Pick up respiratory. Everything right again, everything an emergency or a favor. Everyone else sick or sent home or did you ever even see their faces, is it always just badges, just lists. They said you don’t have to do it all, but there’s the pager, another alarm clipping away.

Too many patients. Too many bed numbers pasted white-over-red, staccato alarms for names he couldn’t remember. He

hadn't slept, not since—what, three shifts, five? One nap unspooled into a cough at the door. Up, walk, scrub back in, mask tight.

Another alarm, nearer, shrieked through the corridor. He jerked around and sprinted, his heart a stun gun, whole self compressed down to movement so frantic he lost distinction. Then his foot slid. Scrub booties greasing over a clear sluice of pinkish fluid puddling under a cart.

Noise emptied out of the corridor and into him, fizzing in his vertebrae, a whole world of racket suddenly silent as if it'd been put on pause.

He curled around his leg before pain took shape and assessed inwardly, confused, nearly gentle with himself: So, this is it. The line crossed. This is where the lights stop flashing warnings and go dark.

Some persistent part of him had counted on being spared; as if stamina, endlessly proven, might pass for invulnerability. That being needed was fuel enough, that a body moving on demand would not break. He'd walked the edge, run the corridor, outrun every odds-list scribbled.

He'd run and run and run until the day the race finally tripped him.

He knew by the scream in his shin before anyone reached out to help…

He'd broken his leg.

***

Xie Lian's house had bookshelves he'd never, not in his entire lifetime, manage to fill.

Having not stepped foot here in so many weeks, he'd forgotten how much space affluence required. The rooms finished but unlived: guest pillows dressed and undressed, couches sharp under silk throws, white air in alcoves twisting its vacancy over

pottery busts his mother bought. Xie Lian's mother decorated with the conviction that aesthetic ambition would assign meaning, make a home gleam so richly empty, strangers would envy even its coldness. The refrigerator bristled with unopened watercress, steaks dyed deeper maroon than any living blood, and animal faces pressed so neatly against glass he always apologized before eating.

He sat immobilized, casted leg propped up on a pillow on the couch. His pill bottles made a museum-perfect line on the coffee table: acetaminophen, ibuprofen, oxy. A pillbox for iatrogenic humility, all useless tonight but Tylenol, of which he'd barely nibbled half.

He stacked his laptop and chart print-outs on the armrest, shuffled arrays of blue and white beside his teacup still half-full of last night's steep. Over the scrolling text of admission reports, the television talked to him. News anchors had switched from anxious to wearing the strange fervor of people talking about disaster from behind impenetrable glass.

"…no cause for panic," the television said, and then: "… confirmed cases up to 5,000, cluster in Hubei only—limited human-to-human transmission suspected…"

He flipped to another channel, jumping through images of Wuhan's empty streets.

"…Wuhan under lockdown as of January 23. Travel out, and in, is completely restricted… authorities say they're stepping up regional hospital support…"

Xie Lian muted it again. But the sound returned in his head:

"WHO has not declared public health emergency of international concern."

He unmuted again:

"…medical staff reuse single N95 masks due to shortages…"

"…temporary hospitals converting school gymnasiums into

wards…”

“…citizens asked to stay indoors, avoid mass gatherings… WHO to reconvene on PHEIC decision January 30.”

The news droned on. Italy reporting cases. France. Germany.

Officially, Xie Lian was suspended on an indefinite mandatory medical leave: *“You are critical support, Dr. Xie, and we appreciate your commitment. We will need you only when you’re fully well. Please focus on your recovery.”*

He let the email go unanswered. Still, they sent him cases to triage, stacks of images to annotate, expense reports to proof.

Between, he hobbled around home; his armpit ached where cheap plastic bit into it. He’d wedge himself to stand at the balcony doors and watch empty boulevards punctured by recycling trucks or wild dogs free to do as they please.

He would open the refrigerator (hard, because of the boot and then the crutch) and stare for a good minute, stomach inert. There was dragon fruit, cheese, and nothing resembling appetite. Water tasted like sterilized silver. Once he spilled a cup and cleaned it compulsively, twenty minutes gone until his fingers went as numb as his leg.

The news went on. Something about officials welding a door shut because of a reported fever and a resident refusing to stay put.

Xie Lian muted it again and returned to his email.

That night, he hobbled to each doorway, pausing, listing on his crutch as if waiting for one of them to do something other than separate air. His indoor world cycled static. Endlessly aware of the cast's drag; not of healing nor breaking, but inert stuckness, the self as nothing but distance limited to colored walls and administrative requests. He stared at the orange lamps in his living room and began hallucinating them as surgical domes, furniture as patients waking from anesthesia.

He halved his dose of Tylenol just to prove he could. He set his phone's alarm for 3:00 AM, then 5:27, then 6:41, misshapen times as though waking at the wrong hour would realign the world, or at least break the loop. He unspooled an entire roll of cling film over half an apple, wrapped it all the way and then unwrapped it, layer by layer.

He deleted and rewrote the same email to Mu Qing three times:

Let me know if you get sick.

-deleted-

Do you need masks?

-deleted—useless, what could he do from here—

I'm awake if anyone needs help on review.

That one he left unsent.

He pointed every remote at the TV until the batteries dominoed out of their housing. He unscrewed the casters from an ottoman with his pocketknife, only to replace them.

From the guest bath, he rolled a clean towel compulsively, notching its corner level with the marble sink. He stood at the entryway mirror and stared into it until, like a word said aloud too many times, he stopped recognizing his face. He pulled up one pant leg and prodded the cast softly until prickles reawakened in his thigh.

Back in the kitchen, he stripped one steak from its vacuum packaging, only to wrap it again and shove it into a colder corner, embarrassed by appetite, and all his other recent aversions. He started the dishwasher just to listen to rinsing. He typed his own

name in search bars: on the hospital network, on Baidu, in a dead novelty Facebook account, then closed every tab before the page could load. The cursor blinked at “Dr. Xie Lian recent interview—” lone, incomplete.

***

One morning, he came to from chemical sleep, the edges of himself spotty, tongue roped with lint and oxycet leftover. He’d given in to taking his pills not for pain but insomnia. He blinked crust from his eyes and popped himself upright on the couch, the house feeling cavernous and hostile.

His phone vibrated. More emails. An inbox fat with admin inquiries and endless spreadsheets, nothing special until a heavy subject line stopped the scroll:

FWD: Internal Review – Immediate Documentation Request Concerning Administrative Authorizations (JUN ’19–JAN ’20)

A forwarded email from hospital legal, CC’d to three department heads, then him:

As part of a preliminary internal review regarding hospital-level infection control measures between November 2019 and January 2020, we kindly ask Dr. Xie Lian to submit any documentation, correspondence, or administrative decisions made in his capacity as interim procurement liaison and clinical liaison to the finance department.

Just the chewed stick of: this is routine, nothing to trouble your conscience.

He scrolled up and down the email and took another sip of night-cold tea just to wedge himself into the present.

Routine, he reminded himself. Bureaucracy metabolizing bureaucracy. Still, his heart had that hound's-ear flutter of knowing when something was off.

Three days later, the call came at 11:47 PM.

Xie Lian had been half-dozing on the couch, laptop warm on his chest, when his phone buzzed against the coffee table.

"Dr. Xie? This is Deputy Administrator Chen from the municipal health bureau. I hope I'm not calling too late."

"No, it's fine. How can I help you?"

"We're conducting a routine follow-up regarding the internal review you received notification of. Some questions about your procurement decisions in the latter half of 2019. Would you be available to meet tomorrow afternoon?"

"I... yes, of course. Is there something specific—"

"Nothing urgent, Dr. Xie. Just standard procedure. We'll send someone to your residence around 2 PM, if that works for you."

"My residence? Wouldn't it be easier to meet at the hospital?"

A pause. "Given your current medical leave, we thought your home would be more convenient. Unless you'd prefer otherwise?"

"No, that's... that's fine. 2 PM tomorrow."

"Excellent. Have a good evening, Dr. Xie."

The line went dead.

Xie Lian stared at his phone for a long moment, then opened a group chat.

Xie Lian [11:52 PM]

Hey, weird question but did you guys get any calls from the health bureau about that internal review thing?

Feng Xin [11:54 PM]

What review?

Mu Qing [11:55 PM]

The procurement one? No calls. Why?

Xie Lian [11:56 PM]

Someone from municipal health is coming to my house tomorrow. Says it's routine follow-up.

To my house, specifically. Not the hospital.

The typing indicators appeared, then disappeared. Appeared again.

Feng Xin [11:58 PM]

that's... weird

Mu Qing [11:59 PM]

Did you ask why not at the hospital?

Xie Lian [12:00 AM]

I tried. They said it was more convenient because of my leave.

Feng Xin [12:02 AM]

what did you procure back then?

Xie Lian [12:03 AM]

Standard stuff. PPE, equipment. You know how it was, everyone scrambling for supplies.

Mu Qing [12:04 AM]

Right. I'm sure it's nothing.

Xie Lian [12:06 AM]

Yeah, probably nothing. Just feels weird.

Feng Xin [12:07 AM]

get some sleep. it'll be fine.

***

Xie Lian dressed carefully, collar ironed, shirt tucked, tie knotted too tight and then retied slightly looser. He limped down the hallway with his crutch, checking the front door more times than he could reason.

At 1:58 PM, the doorbell rang.

The man waiting outside wore a charcoal-gray coat, a mask, and an ID badge on a lanyard tucked inside. When Xie Lian opened the door, the man extended one gloved hand.

“Dr. Xie. Deputy Administrator Chen,” he said. “Thank you for agreeing to meet on such short notice.”

“Of course. Please, come in.”

Chen stepped inside, brisk and unintrusive. He declined tea, declined to sit on the couch, and instead opened a thin black laptop on Xie Lian’s dining table.

“Let’s begin with a simple affirmation,” Chen said, placing a small audio recorder between them. “This is a voluntary inquiry. You are not under any formal investigation. This is for documentation purposes only.”

Xie Lian nodded. “Understood.”

The recorder clicked on.

“Dr. Xie, can you confirm that between June 2019 and January 2020, you served as interim procurement liaison for Wuhan General?”

“Correct,” Xie Lian said, then rubbed the back of his neck. “Well, I was doing so many things at that time, I’m not even sure what my titles would’ve been.”

Chen tapped a few keys on the laptop. “And in one of these roles, you were responsible for initiating requests for medical supplies, reviewing vendor quotes, and communicating clinical priorities to the purchasing committee?”

“Yes. But final decisions were made by committee vote or executive sign-off. I didn't have unilateral authority.”

Xie Lian blinked. “I made a suggestion to stagger orders.

There was a budget freeze that quarter. We were instructed to defer noncritical restocks until Q1."

"And who instructed that?"

"The finance director at the time. It came in a departmental memo, I think."

"Do you have a copy?"

"I didn't keep one personally, but it should be archived in the internal server."

Chen nodded. "And in December 2019, when ICU and ER departments began flagging increased respiratory admissions, did you recommend adjusting procurement?"

"I brought it up," Xie Lian said slowly.

"And what was the result?"

"They said it was seasonal variance. Flu peak."

"No additional PPE was ordered?"

"There was a small supplemental order placed. Mostly gloves and fluid-resistant gowns. The bulk respirator requisition was postponed due to lack of inventory from vendors. Multiple hospitals were requesting the same supplies."

Chen typed steadily. "Were you aware that on December 18th, Zhongnan Hospital escalated a joint procurement request for additional negative pressure units?"

"I saw the memo." Xie Lian kept neutral. "But at that time, it hadn't been cleared by the coordination office. Our capacity planning was based on citywide distribution models."

"So you're saying you were not in a position to act unilaterally."

“I relayed clinical observations. I didn’t control supply chains,” Xie Lian said more firmly.

Chen looked up for the first time. “Do you believe your recommendations reflected the urgency of the situation?”

Xie Lian met his gaze. “I relayed what I saw. But I wasn’t in infectious disease. I wasn't in charge of outbreak surveillance.”

Chen leaned back slightly, folding his hands. “One last question for today. Sometime in early January, you annotated a respiratory admission chart with the note: ‘Consider isolation.’ Is that correct?”

“I wrote that, yes.” Xie Lian said.

“And did you report that to infection control?”

“I never received a response.”

Chen nodded once, stood, and closed his laptop. “Thank you, Dr. Xie. That’s all for now.”

“That’s it?”

“For today. You may be contacted for follow-up. Please make yourself available if needed.”

He took the recorder, smiled thinly, and let himself out.

Xie Lian remained at the table long after the door shut.

***

Xie Lian [3:24 PM]

Just had the meeting with the health bureau.

That was… really weird.

Very polite, but something’s off.

My gut says this isn’t “routine.”

I don’t like how this feels.

He watched the typing bubbles blink into existence. Then vanish. Nothing for a full minute.

Mu Qing [3:27 PM]

If it’s routine, then don’t overthink it. Just give them what they asked for.

Feng Xin [3:28 PM]

Yeah. Maybe they’re just documenting stuff because of the media pressure.

Xie Lian [3:29 PM]

Media pressure?

Mu Qing [3:30 PM]

A few articles going around. Retrospective pieces on supply shortages. Some people asking where decisions went wrong.

Xie Lian [3:31 PM]

Do they mention me?

The typing bubble started. Then stopped. Then started again.

Mu Qing [3:32 PM]

Not directly.

But some screenshots are floating around. Internal memos. One has your initials and are circulating in some chat groups.

Feng Xin [3:33 PM]

It's not just you. Everyone's looking for someone to blame.

It's just noise. You didn't do anything wrong.

Xie Lian [3:34 PM]

Still feels like I'm being lined up for something.

They asked me about a note I wrote on an admission chart in January. Something about isolation precautions. How would they even have that?

No response.

Xie Lian [3:36 PM]

Guys?

Feng Xin [3:40 PM]

I'm sure you did everything by the book.

Mu Qing [3:40 PM]

These things usually blow over.

***

The second email came four days later.

Please provide timestamped correspondence for the following:

– PPE supply requisitions dated between 12.15.19 and 01.10.20

– Any emergency authorization forms processed without Finance Committee sign-off

– Minutes or summary from informal interdepartmental discussions concerning isolation ward capacity

Failure to provide documentation may result in a formal review escalation.

Xie Lian reread the phrase *"informal interdepartmental discussions"* twice, then clicked through his folder archives. There were no official minutes. How could there have been? Those conversations happened in hallways, break rooms, whispered during rounds while nurses bled salt into their masks.

He found an email thread where he'd forwarded ventilator usage stats to a shared account. One of the recipients, now notably absent from the CC field, had replied: *"We'll wait for Regional's approval before diverting elective inventory. Hold for now."*

***

On another day:

Can you clarify why N95 requisition 419-Z was escalated via internal memo, bypassing the purchasing committee?

He'd escalated it because there were 18 surgical masks left in supply. Because a scrub nurse in trauma had reused hers for five shifts. He answered plainly:

Due to emergent shortfall and patient exposure risk. Context attached in prior memo.

The reply came a day later:

Prior memo not located. Please reattach.

Note: Emergency protocol requires dual sign-off. No such authorization on file.

There hadn’t been time for a second sign-off. He tried the group chat again.

Xie Lian [2:08 AM]

Getting buried in admin requests. Anyone else getting emails

from the audit subcommittee?

Mu Qing [2:12 AM]

Nope.

Feng Xin [2:17 AM]

just the usual stuff. nothing weird.

Xie Lian [2:18 AM]

They're asking for off-the-record meeting minutes. I didn’t even know off-the-record was now on record.

Mu Qing [2:23 AM]

Maybe just covering their ass. Don’t read into it.

Feng Xin [2:25 AM]

Yeah you should rest. you sound wrecked.

***

Two days later, his access to the purchasing dashboard stalled out. “Authorization expired. Contact IT Admin.” No one responded to the help ticket.

When he opened a report on PPE usage and tried to tag it for oversight review, the system error said:

Permission level insufficient.

When he emailed accounting about a batch of invoice files gone missing from the shared drive, the message bounced. “This account is no longer active.” And when he sent a polite query to the administrative director (just to ask if his role was still current) the reply came from an assistant:

Dear Dr. Xie,

Thank you for your service. As of January 28, your administrative duties are considered fulfilled. Further inquiries may be directed to hospital legal.

That night, he received his usual folder of triage reports. Unlabeled. No sender. Just a compressed file with three dozen CTs and an open spreadsheet waiting for names to be matched to lesion sizes. He opened the group chat again.

Xie Lian [11:39 PM]

This feels off.

Feng Xin [11:44 PM]

how?

Xie Lian [11:45 PM]

Like they’re prepping something. The questions. The missing access. The way my procurement requests are being reframed

retroactively.

Mu Qing [11:47 PM]

It’s audit season. Everyone’s on edge.

Xie Lian [11:48 PM]

Then why am I the only one being asked about decisions it seems?

Feng Xin [11:49 PM]

maybe you're the only one who still has access to the old chains. shrug

Mu Qing [11:51 PM]

It’ll pass. Don’t do anything stupid.

Xie Lian typed, then backspaced. Typed again.

Xie Lian [11:55 PM]

Thanks.

***

Xie Lian’s messages dried up. Normally, nurses still pinged him for second opinions, staff from neuro copied him into patient

chains he wasn't technically on, but by the second week of February, those stopped cold.

The next day, a colleague forwarded him a link from an internal forum. Then a Weibo screenshot. Then another.

Anonymous Weibo post (timestamp: 03:12 AM):

“Explains a lot: ‘Administrative delays in Q4 procurement contributed to critical PPE shortages.’ Who was in charge of supplies? Memo below.”

[Image: Memo excerpt, with red underlines:]

"Interim procurement and finance liaison failed to prioritize emergency supply acquisition despite repeat clinical concerns. Delay in November and early December ordering caused supply deficits during January surge."

The language was clipped directly from reports he wrote, carefully and truthfully, months before. They’d mined his emails and selectively quoted them. Worse: they’d cut out context. He had escalated concerns. He’d flagged shortages. He’d submitted extra orders. He’d even annotated charts with "consider isolation.”

The comments exploded:

“People died because someone was asleep at the wheel.”

“Why was a surgeon doing admin work in the first place?”

“Budget over safety. Typical.”

“Bet he’s at home right now, still getting paid.”

The PR team issued a soft denial of “malicious rumors” *without* specifying who was or wasn’t involved.

That night, he opened the chat.

Xie Lian [10:42 PM]

Did either of you see the memo that’s making rounds?

It’s quoting my admin notes out of context.

I escalated the PPE requests. I have the emails. I annotated that chart in January *because* I was trying to get it flagged.

I didn’t do anything wrong.

Typing bubbles blinked for a long time.

Mu Qing [11:24 PM]

You should talk to a lawyer.

Ban Yue arrived at Xie Lian's apartment, her mask pulled tight and fogging the thin glasses she wore.

"Dr. Xie," she said, then stepped inside. "What a beautiful place. Thank you for meeting me here. With the lockdown restrictions, it's much more practical."

She followed him toward the dining table where he'd already cleared space. He'd called her because she was the only lawyer he could think of who might remember him as a person rather than a headline.

"I've reviewed the materials you sent," Ban Yue said, opening her briefcase. "The situation is... complex."

It was strange seeing her composed and lively. He remembered her as a timid first-year law student who'd been brought to the ER. Bicycle versus car door. Concussion, lacerated forehead, and yet more concerned about missing her contracts exam. He'd stayed late to make sure the sutures were clean and had helped her contact her professors about the missed exam.

"Complex how?" he asked now.

Ban Yue pulled out a folder thick with printouts. "The allegations against you aren't criminal. Yet. But they're building a comprehensive administrative case." She flipped through pages marked with colored tabs. "Dereliction of duty. Negligent administration. Failure to escalate critical health concerns."

"But I did escalate—"

"I know. I've seen your emails. The problem is context." She turned one of the printouts toward him. It was his memo, sections highlighted in yellow. "Look at this. Your November supply requisition. You wrote: 'Delaying until Q1 per finance directive.' That's been reframed as you choosing to delay."

"The finance directive was mandatory. I couldn't override it."

"The director who issued that directive transferred to Shanghai in December. The purchasing committee chair retired in January. The administrative director who would have signed off on emergency procurement? Medical leave since mid-January. You're the only one left with clear documentation."

"So I'm convenient."

"You're accessible." She closed the folder. "Dr. Xie, I need you to understand something. This isn't really about what you did or didn't do. It's about narrative control. The central government needs to demonstrate that the initial response failures were due to individual incompetence, not systemic issues. Have you seen the news this morning?"

"I try not to."

She pulled out her phone and showed him a news article: "Local Administrative Failures Contributed to Early COVID-19 Spread, Investigation Finds." His name appeared in the third paragraph.

"Someone leaked your personnel file to three different news outlets yesterday," she said. "Your salary, your home address, your medical leave status."

"What do you recommend?"

"Cooperate fully with the investigation. Provide all documentation they request. Don't speak to media. Don't post on social media. Don't contact colleagues who might still be involved in the hospital's response."

"And if they escalate to criminal charges?"

"We'll cross that bridge when we come to it. For now, keep your head down. Let me handle communications."

As she packed her briefcase, she added: "Dr. Xie, I have to ask. Is there anything—anything at all—that you haven't told me? Any decision you made that could be construed as outside

protocol?"

"No. I mean, we all made judgment calls. The situation was changing hourly. But I followed procedure."

"Good. Stick to that. Procedure was followed. You acted within your authority."

She stood, then hesitated at the door. "For what it's worth," she said, "I remember what kind of doctor you were. Still are, I'm sure. That has to count for something."

After she left, Xie Lian remained at the dining table, feeling washed out in cataract-white daylight. There was the sound of the street, loose and crumpling beneath siren-wind and the rare machine-thud of maintenance trucks just past the balcony glass. Empty, cavernous air layered between couch and wall, wall and window, quadrants of listless waiting.

Trapped. How ridiculous, to be trapped with ten rooms. An excess of nowhere-to-go.

He considered how one ought to fill such an interior so that it might banish his dread. Perhaps buy orchids. Hell, a goldfish, just to add some good kind of frantic to life.

***

He didn't see the note under his door at first. Some neighbor's stubby handwriting and careful block characters: *Dr. Xie, some reporters were asking about you. I told them you're a good person. Stay strong.*

He almost wept. What should have been comfort rolled bile-green in his gut, proof manifest that this was following him home.

He couldn't sit still. He assembled and disassembled a bookshelf. He organized his mail in alphabetical order. He cleaned the inside of his oven with an old toothbrush, sniffing at bitter metal, scared and repelled by the memory of abundance. He wrote a letter to his parents he'd never send, apologizing wordlessly by

folding and unfolding it until it fell apart. He put on hospital scrubs and then civilian clothes and wrestled them off again. Finally, he vigorously scrubbed the strip of marble floor where the neighbor's note had been, unable to rid it of its new, animal knowledge.

His thoughts had no brakes and ran in mad broken circles. Outside, even with the lockdown, there were still bare queues at pharmacies and lone cigarettes glowing under bus shelters. He pulled on a coat just to tumble out somewhere, heart tanked up as if running toward a cliff.

He tried calling a taxi, but the driver canceled after seeing the pickup address. The second driver did the same. On the third attempt, he got through, but when the car arrived, the driver rolled down his window just enough to speak.

"You're Dr. Xie?"

"Yes."

"I can't take you. Sorry."

The window rolled back up, and the car pulled away.

He stood at crystal duskfall, bannered in city sodium and refrigerated anxiety, the world rolling indifferently beneath. He held his phone limply, the only warmth left its battery.

Xie Lian [7:23 PM]

I can't get a taxi. Three drivers have refused to pick me up.

I think my neighbors are talking about me.

I don't know what to do.

Feng Xin [7:24 PM]

that's fucked up

can you walk somewhere?

Xie Lian [7:25 PM]

I have this cast.

Feng Xin [7:26 PM]

right sorry

maybe just... stay in tonight?

Xie Lian [7:27 PM]

I've been staying in for days. I'm losing my mind.

Feng Xin [7:28 PM]

you're not losing your mind

you're just stressed

this will pass

Xie Lian [7:29 PM]

Will it? And where's Mu Qing? He hasn't replied to anything.

Feng Xin [7:32 PM]

he's... dealing with stuff

his mom's been sick

Xie Lian [7:33 PM]

He's avoiding me, isn't he?

@Mu Qing are you avoiding me?

Mu Qing [7:41 PM]

I'm not avoiding you.

I'm being careful.

Xie Lian [7:42 PM]

Careful of what? Me?

Mu Qing [7:43 PM]

They're asking questions about everyone who worked with you.

Feng Xin [7:44 PM]

so what? let them

we didn't do anything wrong

Mu Qing [7:45 PM]

It doesn't matter if we did anything wrong.

Association is enough and I have responsibilities. My mother needs round-the-clock care now. The treatments are expensive and I can't lose my job.

Feng Xin [7:48 PM]

abandoning your friend is pathetic

Mu Qing [7:49 PM]

Easy for you to say. Your parents are retired and comfortable.

Feng Xin [7:50 PM]

that's not the point

the point is loyalty

Mu Qing [7:51 PM]

Loyalty doesn't pay for dialysis.

Feng Xin [7:54 PM]

protecting your family by throwing xie lian under the bus?

great strategy

Mu Qing [7:55 PM]

I'm not throwing anyone under the bus.

I'm making a rational decision. Maybe you should try it sometime.

***

The next month was marked by how many notifications his phone could successfully string together, one after another: news agencies, PR vultures, numbers recognizable as mainland, as Beijing, as Shanghai. His phone vibrated until all he could hear was not just the vibration, but its thin gasping after a flurry of anonymous rings.

"Dr. Xie, do you have a statement about yesterday's allegations?"

"Would you be willing to set the record straight?"

"Some sources say you warned administration in November. Why didn't you push harder?"

"Dr. Xie, local clinicians are claiming shortages worsened after your committee edits. Did you underestimate the risk for personal convenience?"

"Why did you pick up administrative work as a neurosurgeon? Shouldn't you have known you were stretching yourself thin?"

"You say you acted in good faith, but what about the people who died?"

"Dr. Xie, if you had to do it all again, would you at least take responsibility now?"

"Was salary your main motivation for accepting administrative work?"

Bloodhounds.

He slogged circles around tabletops, between couch and bed and bathroom, foot trapped in a wrecking ball boot of gray plastic. Home was a penitentiary, a straitjacket. He grew to despise his own double, reflected crookedly in a barren hallway mirror.

A week later, he heard someone outside the lobby of his complex. "That's the building," they said, and masked faces started appearing along with anonymous fliers calling him out for 'medical murder.' People chanted slogans in the stairwells: "Doctor Out! Fault Has a Face! Never Forget Who Brought in the Plague!" Spray-paint appeared along the marble panels and security gate—white stoat white devil white mask murderer—his name too, his real name, pounded out in neon stencil. Garbage bins pulled over, glass recyclables upturned. He watched a woman from the window, cigarette halo hiding her pallor as she used insecticide spray to tag a new line of graffiti: PLAGUE-BRINGER GO HOME.

If Xie Lian pressed his ear to the door, he'd hear movie rumors rolling off shoes and ornamental bamboo planters smashed against the steps. Each night brought text alerts from the building security: someone lit firecrackers under the lobby windows; a set of tires were slashed open behind the bicycle rack; reports of broken elevator buttons.

Security staff stopped waving hello. He covered repair costs frantically, trying to atone, thinking, *if you just keep apologizing, keep covering everything, this can be controlled.*

It shocked him how rapidly money fell away. When work was steady, inconvenience could be swept aside, but now? At this rate, he was spending enough to construct a second apartment complex of the same prestige. And what if this never blew over? What if, even after his leg healed, he couldn't get his job back? Would any hospital want him again? *"Your CV is impressive, Dr. Xie, but there are... concerns about public reaction..."*

One evening, he poured a drink from some bottle, untouched since his last compulsory dinner party. Something imported,

caramelly, woody.

He packed his lips against the glass and tried to diagnose the quiver in his hands. Was it withdrawal? From work, adrenaline? Was it blood sugar, sleep loss, boredom? He took one swig, then another, and the world felt shatterable. He drank until all bathrooms became sea caves. Until time turned longitudinal and his stomach became a washing machine churning rust water.

Eventually, he wept, plaster fingers clutching his shoulders. He sniffled, rubbed the phone-glow scum from his eyes. He bit the edge of his shaking fist and sobbed into it, bitter spit nestling down his chin. Mouthing *What do I do? What do I do?* against his knuckles between a slurry of hiccups.

He'd never intended harm. He'd never imagined a patient could die because of the inefficiencies he couldn't move. And under the scour: Mu Qing, now absent.

He's protecting himself, Xie Lian heaved, palm cradling a sticky cheek. That was wise. Nothing contaminated was safe to touch.

And his parents. Mother phoning, sometimes, rambling quietly about news she wasn't supposed to see. Father's emails: "Don't answer unless you can, we can handle anything, are you eating? don't reply." He couldn't bring himself to dial back. What if the calls were monitored? What if his parents were to be named guilty by adjacency the way rumor spores always claimed more hosts? Bad enough for him, utterly intolerable for them.

He moaned and groaned, rocking back and forth on the floor, hyperventilating now. There was no one left to reach with, for, or towards. He felt alone. Disposable. Unable to wade through the thick bog of bureaucratic stink.

"I don't know. I don't know. Please, please, please—"

Why isn't there anyone to fix this with a phone call, or a code, or a skill I actually have?

At the table in the OR, everything had sense. See one, do one, know where to cut and how deep; follow bright vessels, cauterize, suction away dark flood. Hematoma, retractor, drill, irrigate, close. There had always been a border to disaster and a trick for outwitting death if your hands were steady enough.

He lurched to his feet, dragging his weighted boot in a spring for the kitchen. He vomited into the sink, liquor and phlegm sliming the metal. Once, twice, salt-mucus slinging down his chin.

When the heaving spent itself and he could only shiver, supported by the sticky gleam of half-washed counter light, he spat and crawled to the front door. He put his back to it and buried his chin between his knees, hiding from this place his mother meant to make beautiful. He kneaded apathy into his cheeks with his knuckles; so empty now he was nothing but shadow-carcass.

He fumbled for his phone and scrolled the news, eyes burning with reflected shine and tears.

COVID MISMANAGEMENT. WUHAN HOSPITAL DELAYS.

OPINION: WHERE DID CHINA'S DOCTORS GO WRONG?

Administrative Memos Under Fire — Neurosurgeon Linked.

FACES OF FAILURE: INSIDE THE IDENTITY OF DR. XIE LIAN.

Photos vaguely recognizable of his own hairline, his coat. Cruel memes barely making sense to his failing mind: white stoat, white flag, white tie, white noise. White: everything ripe for wiping away, for whatever anyone wanted written atop it.

He scrolled blindingly, tears welling again, hoping for a story, anything, any horror or farce or human folly that wasn't the engine of his current, narrowing universe.

And then, unexpectedly, a headline stopped his scroll:

HOSTAGE CRISIS: U.S. Military Surgeon Abducted in Ghazni

Ambush

He blinked at it as if at a mirage. The display fragmented: swamped pixels crisping into little electric rainbows. American soldier, lost. Unknown desert. Unknown fate. Dead, maybe. It seemed mundane from where Xie Lian sat. Infinitely far from viral rumor or breakdown in supply chains. Something unrelated to him. He almost sobbed in exhausted, mortified relief.

Yes, let someone else be news, let the world be vast and tragic. Please, for one night, may my life not be enough material for the news cycle.

He stared at the headline. It hurt differently, almost cathartic. A nowness folding war and virus together: bad luck goes round-robin, pain is communal, and for this slice of annihilated day Xie Lian's insignificance returned.

He tapped into the article and blinked away the chevron of color-distorted tears.

A U.S. Army trauma surgeon was taken hostage last week during a Taliban ambush on a medical convoy in Ghazni province, Pentagon officials confirmed Monday. The surgeon, "Wu Ming," whose name is being withheld for security reasons, was traveling with Afghan National Army medics under a humanitarian transport flag when the convoy was intercepted on a rural stretch.

Insurgents posing as Afghan security forces reportedly established a fake checkpoint, forcing the convoy to halt before seizing several personnel. The U.S. surgeon was among those captured.

Defense officials believe the abduction was premeditated, though they have not confirmed whether the medical team was specifically targeted. Efforts to locate the missing personnel are ongoing. The U.S. is currently working through intermediaries in the Gulf region, but no direct lines of communication with the captors have been established yet.

Scrolling further, the article spilled out attempts at narrative calm with numbed sidewalk quotes from other soldiers about how "he always kept to himself" and "had a good heart." U.S. defense officials debated risk with requests for "proof of life," so far unnamed and unseen.

Xie Lian wiped snot with his sleeve. His head fell back against the door and he puffed out a cramped, exhausted breath.

"Thank you, Wu Ming. You've made this night easier for someone who'll never matter to you at all."

He chuckled, wetly, at the phrase that limped through his mind: *thank you for your service.* The catch-all that Americans applied, hats in hand. Thank you for taking the world's dreadful stage. It sounded so stupid, militarized, Star-Spangled, and still, authentic in an idle way. If gratitude really traveled, why not? So Xie Lian mouthed the words.

Thank you for your service.

He sat there, listening to his breath and sniffling for a while, then tottered through gray shadows toward a drip-lit bedroom, making it only halfway onto the foot of the bed.

***

Xie Lian woke shortly after four with a migraine. Thankfully, there were no protesters stomping around outside to exacerbate it. Unfortunately, he had to piss. Now.

He peed for a full minute, dizzy with relief, then scavenged for anti-inflammatory meds. He found a stray antibiotic blister, an old foil for anti-nausea, but every box that might be ibuprofen was empty. Had he really run out? Sucking in his cheeks, he let himself hope he might be able to pop down to the store on the corner for some. Maybe be alone just long enough to feel like a human in motion again. With luck, the protesters would be asleep for another hour.

Nailing himself with willpower, he threw on a hoodie, a

crumpled N95 mask, and worked his way down to the lobby via the stairs because they'd temporarily decommissioned the elevators. He hurried, best he could with his crutch, past the three security guards posted at the cam-feed desk, bowing sheepishly twice to each of them.

"Sorry, sorry, really, just running to the store—sorry for all this—sorry for the extra hours, I know it's..." He sighed. "The noise and destruction and—I'll be quick, thank you, sorry."

One guard tapped twice on the desk.

Starlight lived freely out on the frost-thawing streets. Halfway to the store, he passed beneath magnolia branches bowing into the curb. He gave them a whiff. Air flooded pure into the pocket above his sternum: laundry, wet pavement, the clinging ammonia of urban pre-dawn. He grinned uncontrollably, cheeks tight with drummed blood. He felt free. He wanted this errand to last as long as thirty lifetimes without a phone to coyote horrors in his pocket.

The convenience store doors shivered open: bland light, rows of steamed buns sweating undisturbed in their heat-cage. There were two people in line, but neither clocked him. If they did, they were wise enough to treat all shapes this morning as ghosts. He picked out a bottle of ibuprofen, generic brand, a Wanglaoji tea, and even swiped a spicy pork rice ball for no reason except having made this swift, luxurious experiment in freedom.

He paid and turned the corner toward home, plastic bag crinkling, eyes still keyed in the afterimage of those white magnolia flowers. Someone—a rangy figure with his head ducked down, hands shoved deep into the dip of an old padded jacket—stepped out of the alley at the exact pace to intersect him. Xie Lian flinched before he could help it. Reflex. But it felt stupid and mean as soon as it happened.

He quick-bowed: "Sorry—excuse me."

The other kept walking through the thinned light, close enough that their shoulders would brush, so Xie Lian turned half

sideways to make space. The man wedged close, and in that blink an arm came up, driving something into Xie Lian's belly. Pain took his breath as fast as it took his strength.

All morning, the street had smelled of wet magnolias and frost. Now there was iron. He barely had time to register the difference as his knees went out and he hit the pavement. In his eye-line: a clump of white petals along the gutter, some still clean, most streaked with tire-black. He watched them blur and thought, almost absently, that he hoped none of them turned red. It comforted him, somehow, to imagine the petals holding onto a little bit of their brightness.

Xie Lian floated in fever murk and came up dripping. The world poured in plastic-wrapped, sinless, antiseptically new while machines mumbled into his ears. Shadows projected through mesh curtains, perfumed with bleach, latex, and wilting bouquets. He waited for pain, yet it was declawed. Uncomfortable still, of course. Achy and like rolling in a mattress depression stamped by another body, unable to find the fit to his shape. He cased his boundaries with a roll of his head: arm, hand, IV, a blanket gathered around the dressings holding everything inert from sternum to navel.

"Xie Lian—!" Chair feet squealing. Feng Xin loomed at the bedside, elbows chicken-winged.

Xie Lian squeezed his eyes shut. He wanted the blessing of narcotic nothingness again. Fumbling a smile, he tried to sit up. Tendrils in his belly and sides squirmed and tightened.

"Hey," he rasped.

Feng Xin, for his part, seemed hellbent on spending everything left in his spine by checking monitors and glancing over what he must imagine to be signs of distress.

"No one's going to touch you," he muttered. "We're here."

***

The next time he woke, his mother was at his bedside. She flicked invisible crumbs away with wet towels, then dabbed fugitive smears near his lip with a wad of tissue. She stroked his temples and ears with her second knuckle, unsatisfied that his sleep came only with chemicals. Perched nearby was his father, one ankle settled over the other as he scrolled through a news article on his phone, frowning every so often. He untied the plastic knot of a dried plum bag, pinched one out for himself, then another, and tucked it at the fringe of Xie Lian's reach.

Before he could so much as blink toward the plum, his mother plucked it.

“He just got stabbed—*stabbed*. You think he should be eating something that cools the blood and tightens everything? Let the wound settle first!”

The door thocked as Feng Xin slipped in, reeking of cafeteria coffee. He brightened and dropped his backpack, water bottle, and an armload of store-bought congee on a side table.

“You’re awake again! Do you…?” He cleared his throat. “Do you… remember what happened?”

“Stop worrying him, he only just woke.”

Xie Lian’s whole body constricted. His eyes wandered the pale, recently mopped world of the recovery suite, colors wet and slick as boiled bone. The plastic iridescence of the IV drips. The choke of the HVAC system flattening all other scents against the ventilator whoosh. Yet magnolia would forever lurk in his nose.

“Yes,” he said.

He remembered walking, a fresh packet of ibuprofen rattling in the bag. He remembered the mask on his face hot with breath, chest tight, but so delighted just to have fresh air and be outside. He remembered hitting the ground and coughing for oxygen. The pain. He remembered footsteps and the brine-and-clove stink of cigarettes and sweat. At first he hoped for help, but phone flashlights started stuttering.

“Did you see? Did you get it?”

“That’s actually him?”

“It’s him.”

One or two kicked him. A woman, stocking-capped, jimmied a thin knife from the pocket of her jacket and drove it through the first wound. She passed it to a man to do the same.

Xie Lian screamed, the pressure in his lungs squalling out. A boot pinned his wrists to the street. The knife passed in a circle of

hands, each taking their turn. He tried to twist sideways, feet kicking, hips hitching, urine hot down the seam of his pants. He tried grabbing for anything: shoes, cement, a sleeve, a pant leg.

"Please, please, stop, stop, I'll do anything, I'm sorry…" He shrieked, full of snot: "It hurts, it fucking hurts!"

Metal plunged the wound again. "Help me. Help me, help me. It hurts, it hurts, it HURTS—!"

Some of them, he sensed, didn't want to do this. Hungry to dish out punishment but wary as if the blood's heat might ignite them too. "Just get it done," one man said, refusing the knife. "Go, go, just fuckin'—he's docile, finish it."

Someone's knee dropped onto his chest, driving air out of his lungs with a flat whimper. Shredded ribbons of his noise, his failing breath steaming out, scudded across concrete slick with opaque, garnet blood.

"Please let me die!" he wailed, twisting. "Please! PLEASE!"

By the end, once the crowd had their fill, all that was left for Xie Lian was the underside view: the curb, chewing gum, iron spill and, above, magnolia blossoms.

***

Xie Lian sat in the coolest corner of his bathroom, hospital discharge paperwork propped against a stool. Script: *Apply a gentle saline solution to the wound twice daily.* He knew that. *Inspect sutures for signs of infection. Contact surgeon at first change. No heavy lifting. Limited stairs.* He knew those too.

He bundled up his shirt and tucked it beneath his chin, exposing his abdomen to the silvery-warm light. The wound was fatly puffy and bunched with stitches. He counted from suture to suture. Some gapped wider than the allotted span, small domes of flesh squeezing out like a tongue pressing through childhood teeth, yellowish crust beginning its healing. He wetted sterile gauze, saline sluicing between gloved fingers, and dabbed the wound tenderly.

He tried to be grateful, if that's the word. They'd stabbed the same place, for whatever reason, all the damage running through one hinge. Easier to clean. Easier, maybe, to forget. He joked aloud to his reflection that they'd spared the rest of him. That was positive thinking, wasn't it? And once COVID died down and work returned to normal (he had to hope it would), he might spare money, time, for revision. Laser the scar to a whittled-down line so that he might not have to step out of the shower and avoid looking at himself in the mirror.

Feng Xin knocked twice before using his key, calling out a warning as he entered. "It's just me. I brought food."

Xie Lian stripped off his gloves. "In here," he called back. "What did you bring?"

Feng Xin appeared in the doorway. "Congee. The good kind from that place near the hospital. And before you say you're not hungry—"

"I wasn't going to."

"You were going to." Feng Xin crossed his arms. "You always pretend you're fine and don't need anything, and then Mu Qing and I have to force-feed you like you're a sick bird."

Xie Lian laughed and his abdomen seized. "Ow. Don't make me laugh."

"Sorry," Feng Xin said. "How's the pain? Are you taking the medication they gave you?"

"It's manageable."

"That's not what I asked."

"I don't like how they make me feel. I can't think clearly."

Feng Xin sighed and twisted off a thermos cap; it burst out a cloud of ginger steam. He ladled some congee into a ceramic bowl, one of Xie Lian's good ones, and brought it to him slumped in the

bathroom corner, surrounded by gauze wrappers, bloody pads, and a sweating saline bottle. The congee was perfect. Thick enough to satisfy, gentle enough for a tender stomach. Real ginger, not powder. And actual chicken, shredded fine.

"Thank you," he said. "This is—it's really good."

"Don't sound so surprised."

Feng Xin sat on the bathroom stool and bounced his leg, drumming fingers against his thigh. He kept opening his mouth as if to speak, then closing it again.

"Feng Xin." Xie Lian paused with the spoon halfway to his mouth. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong. Eat your congee."

"You're being weird. What happened?"

Feng Xin's leg bounced faster. "It's not important right now."

"Feng Xin."

"Really, it's—"

"What happened?"

"Dr. Xie," he said formally. "I lost my job."

Xie Lian tried to lurch upright and gasped as his sutures pulled tight. "What?"

"Hey, hey—" Feng Xin was off the stool and beside him, hands hovering like he wanted to steady Xie Lian but was afraid to touch. "Don't move like that, you'll tear something open."

"What do you mean you lost your job?" Xie Lian said. "What happened? When?"

"Yesterday. And it's okay, really—"

"It's not okay! Nothing about this is okay!”

"You're home and supposed to be resting, not—"

"Feng Xin, what happened?"

Feng Xin sat back on his heels, deflated. "With the investigation, they... they said that since I was your scrub nurse. Well, they're looking into anyone who worked closely with you.”

"It's because they're worried you'll defend me. You're a witness. A credible one. So they remove you first. Did anyone else get fired? Mu Qing?”

"No," Feng Xin admitted. "Just me, I think.”

"What are you going to do?" Xie Lian asked.

Feng Xin shrugged. "Right now? Make sure you don't tear your sutures doing something stupid or get an infection. Doctors make the worst patients.”

***

Xie Lian jerked awake on the couch, belly throbbing as he twisted toward his phone’s shrill ring. The living room was dim, half-masticated, late afternoon haloes illuminating a pair of slippers he’d left by the balcony sliding doors. He couldn’t remember where he’d left his phone. It rang again. Coffee table. There, beneath a newspaper Feng Xin had left behind.

"A-Lian." His father's voice was tight. "Are you awake? Can you talk?"

Xie Lian pushed himself upright, one hand pressed to his bandages. "What's wrong?"

"I just got a call from the university. They've suspended me from my position. Pending review." His father’s voice went up for the first time in a decade. “They called me into a meeting this morning, saying there were 'concerns about my family's recent

circumstances' and that it would be best if I took a leave of absence while they conducted their review. Twenty-eight years teaching political science, A-Lian. Twenty-eight years."

Xie Lian could hear his mother's rapid-fire Mandarin in the background. "—told you this would happen, didn't I tell you this would happen—"

"And your mother," his father continued, "they called her department this afternoon and said her position with social services was being 'restructured' and that her services were no longer needed."

"Both of you? On the same day?"

His father lifted his mouth from the phone to coax his wife. "Don't, please—don't work yourself up. We'll… we'll be all right…" He returned to the phone. "A-Lian, do you think... should we be worried about all this?"

Xie Lian shut his eyes, listening to leather creak as he fell back into the couch. His father must've covered the phone with a palm, soft friction static leaking down the line.

"I don't know," Xie Lian said finally.

"You don't know?"

Xie Lian pressed a hand to his forehead and sighed. His mother's voice came clearly now. She must have wrestled it away from his father. "A-Lian, my heart, listen to mama. We're worried about you."

"Ma—"

"No, let me finish. They came for Feng Xin yesterday. They came for us today. What if tomorrow they decide you haven't been punished enough? What if they—What if they hurt you again?"

The phone rustled as it changed hands to his father. "A-Lian, we're not angry with you. You know that, right? This isn't your

fault. But your mother and I... we're scared."

Xie Lian felt newly helpless. The transparent, resistant skin of childhood lifted: *If even they're frightened, then is there any safety left anywhere, for any of them? For me?*

"Maybe we should consider options," his father said. "I have that colleague in Vancouver who's been asking me to guest lecture. Your mother's sister in California has been inviting us to visit for years."

"You want to leave China?" Xie Lian asked.

"We want to keep our family safe," his mother called from the background. "All of us. You know Qi Rong immigrated there a year ago. We could probably stay with him until we get settled—"

"No," Xie Lian startled. "Absolutely not."

"A-Lian—"

"Ma, no. Not Qi Rong. Anyone but Qi Rong."

His father's voice returned. "All right, all right. We'll figure out the details later."

Xie Lian stared at the ceiling, trying to think through pain medication fog. "What about Feng Xin?"

The line went quiet.

"What about him?" his mother asked carefully.

"He lost his job because of me. I can't just... abandon him here. He has nowhere to go. No family or money to fall back on. If we leave and he stays..."

He could hear his parents having a whispered conversation.

"Well," his father said finally, "why don't you bring him with us?"

“What?"

"Feng Xin," his mother said. "He's been like a son to us for years anyway. If he wants to come and has no other options, why not?"

The idea of leaving China, the country where he'd built his career, where he'd thought he'd grow old, felt impossible. Drastic. Like admitting defeat.

"I don't know," he said quietly. "It seems so... final. Like we're giving up."

"A-Lian," his mother's voice was gentle. "Can you leave your apartment right now? Can you walk to the store without worrying about being recognized?"

"No."

"Then what are we giving up, really? You can't practice medicine here. We can't work. Feng Xin can't work either. We're all just waiting."

Xie Lian closed his eyes. His parents were right. The government needed a scapegoat for the thousands of deaths, the international embarrassment, the economic damage. And if public anger wasn't quite hot enough, well, it wasn't difficult to point the finger and step back. Let the people do what angry people do when they need someone to blame.

"Tonight, A-Lian," his mother pressed gently. "Come home tonight. We'll make plans together. We’ll have Feng Xin pick you up, okay?”

"I can't just—"

A crash echoed from somewhere below, followed by shouting and shattering glass.

"What was that?" his father asked.

Xie Lian crept to the window. A small crowd was gathering near the building, throwing bottles against the lobby doors.

"They're back again," he said.

"What? A-Lian, what's happening?" his mother asked.

"Protesters."

Another bottle smashed.

"How many?"

Xie Lian counted. "Maybe fifteen? Twenty?"

"Call the police."

"Ma, the police aren't going to help me. They'll probably just wait for the crowd to disperse." If they came at all.

More shouting now. Someone had figured out which window was his. They were pointing up at his apartment and the crowd was turning to look.

***

The knock came twenty minutes after the phone call with his parents. He peered through the peephole.

"Dr. Xie Lian?" One man in a dark suit said politely. "We're from the Municipal Health Commission. We need to speak with you regarding the COVID-19 investigation."

Xie Lian's hands shook as he undid the locks. The lead official was a man in his fifties with neatly combed hair and wire-rimmed glasses. Behind him stood two younger officials, one carrying a briefcase, the other holding a stack of loose documents. They arranged themselves in his kitchen. The man, introducing himself as Director Huo, sat across from him.

"Dr. Xie," Director Huo began, pulling papers from his

portfolio, "the investigation into the COVID-19 response at Wuhan Union Hospital has reached its conclusion."

Xie Lian's throat closed. "And?"

"The commission has found evidence of gross administrative negligence in your capacity as interim procurement liaison, resulting in critical supply shortages that directly contributed to preventable patient deaths." He slid a document across the table. "Your medical license is hereby revoked, effective immediately."

He stared at the official seal and listened. Or rather, his ears filled thickly with bone and rushing blood.

"As a result," Director Huo continued, "you will be charged under Criminal Law for negligence of duty by medical personnel. The People's Procuratorate will be filing charges within the week."

"This is—" Xie Lian crumbled. "I escalated every concern. I submitted emergency requisitions. The delays came from finance directives, budget freezes—"

"The evidence speaks for itself, Dr. Xie." One of the younger men spoke. "Your documentation shows repeated failures to prioritize emergency procurement despite clinical warnings. Your November memo specifically states 'delaying until Q1 per finance directive,' a choice that left the hospital critically undersupplied during the surge."

"That wasn't my choice! The finance directive was mandatory. I couldn't override—"

"The officials who issued those directives are no longer available for comment," Director Huo said.

"What about my emails? The escalation requests I sent? The isolation recommendations I made?"

"Recommendations that were inadequately pursued. Notes that failed to trigger proper protocols. The pattern suggests a systematic failure to act with appropriate urgency."

"I followed every protocol available to me—"

"The evidence suggests otherwise, Dr. Xie." He stood, signaling the end of the meeting. "The formal charges will be delivered by courier tomorrow. I suggest you retain legal counsel. The party takes these matters very seriously."

***

The dining room table was buried, a scorched earth landing of documents, visa slips, envelopes stained with oily fingerprint smudges. So many names and titles scrambled. Paper edges nicked Xie Lian's skin. All he could do was keep sorting, family names blinking in triplicate across country codes and faded letterhead. He kept thinking that if he could sort fast enough, he could cling to this storm-bucked ship, sure the waves must subside sometime.

His mother frantically stuffed clothes into an overflowing suitcase, sliding a tangled nest of charger cords into one corner.

"A-Lian, where are your hospital ID badges?" his father called from the bedroom. "The lawyer said anything that proves your employment history."

"Kitchen drawer," Xie Lian replied. "No, wait—study desk. The blue folder."

His phone buzzed with another text from their immigration attorney: *Departure in 8 hours. Documents must be organized. Cash only for travel expenses. Electronic devices may be searched.*

Feng Xin burst through the front door carrying two duffel bags and a manila envelope. "Got your transcripts from the university registrar. I had to bribe the night security guard to let me in." He dumped everything on the table in a worse mess. "How's it going here?"

"Terrible," Xie Lian's mother said, holding up two different coats. "Do we pack for Chinese cold or American cold? What's the weather like in America?"

"Ma, it doesn't matter," Xie Lian said, though his own priorities felt scrambled too. He was trying to decide between which family photos to bring, fingers hovering over one of a younger self in crisp wushu whites holding up a medal, flanked by his smiling parents. It felt like looking at a stranger. That boy in the photo had believed the world was so fair.

"Take it," his mother said, noticing his hesitation. "You need to remember who you were before all this."

"I remember," Xie Lian said, but he slipped the photo out of its frame and into his passport folder anyway.

The lawyer had been clear: emergency humanitarian parole applications were approved, but they had less than twelve hours before the processing window closed. Twelve hours to abandon everything they'd built and flee to a country where Xie Lian might spend years fighting to prove he wasn't a criminal.

"Here." Feng Xin pulled a thick folder from his bag. "Copies of every email, requisition form, and meeting note I could find. Anything that proves you were following orders and doing what you could."

Xie Lian's father was checking items off a handwritten list. "Passports, medical records, bank statements, educational credentials, character references..." He looked up. "A-Lian, we need that character reference from the surgeon who did the rural clinic with you in Yunnan."

"I don't have it. It's in my office at the hospital."

"The hospital you can't go back to," Feng Xin pointed out. "Because there might be security waiting for you."

Xie Lian couldn't return to his workplace, couldn't say goodbye to colleagues or Mu Qing, couldn't even retrieve the little cache of knick-knacks he'd stashed at the back of his locker over the years. A wooden butterfly on a safety pin; a cheap tea thermos stamped with the logo of an insurance company, gifted by a chain-smoking taxi driver; a miniature plastic cabbage tucked into a

pencil-mug emblazoned (“NO BRAINER!”) in cartoon English; a bangle braided from rubber bands from a dementia patient who mistook him for her son. Each lost object called to Xie Lian like a child from behind closing doors; the urgency to collect, to acknowledge, at abrupt odds with the world’s ongoing acceleration.

His mother started crying as she folded his father’s lecture notes into a plastic bag. "What if they don't let us in?" she mumbled. "What if they send us back?"

"They won't," his father said. “The application was approved. We'll be fine."

The doorbell rang, and they all froze.

"Taxi," Feng Xin said, checking his phone. "Forty minutes to the airport."

Xie Lian's mother zipped the overstuffed suitcase shut, the metal teeth snagging. His father folded the handwritten list and tucked it neatly into his coat pocket.

“Wait," Xie Lian said, limping quickly to the bathroom for a box of sterile gauze and medical tape, crushing them into his backpack. He pulled on his thickest sweater, the red one, pilled at the elbows, and tugged the hood over his head, then put on a mask, hoping for anonymity.

In the hallway, Feng Xin collected bags. First his own duffel, then Xie Lian's backpack, then another carry-on, until he looked like a human coat rack draped in luggage straps.

"I can carry something." Xie Lian reached for one of the bags.

Feng Xin redistributed straps across his shoulders. "You're still limping like an old man. Just let me carry them."

As he turned toward the door, the duffel bag's strap slipped from his shoulder and crashed to the floor, spilling clothes and documents across the tiles.

"Shit—sorry, sorry!" Feng Xin hissed, already sprawling to gather armfuls back in.

"Feng Xin," Xie Lian's mother cooed, kneeling to help gather scattered papers. "Breathe."

Xie Lian crouched, best he could, and snatched up stray envelopes. For a second they all knelt together, a clumsy knot of arms and knees. Xie Lian looked up to see his father's felted slippers move back and forth at the edge of their huddled group, hesitant to leave, as if the real goodbye was tangled in this spill.

Feng Xin zipped the duffel tight and patted its pockets like a referee checking equipment. "Safe now. Lucky nothing embarrassing rolled out," he tried to joke nervously.

Xie Lian found some breath huffing out in response. He tried to suck in another breath but came up short. There wasn't enough room in his chest anymore. It stretched, sore behind his ribs and up into his throat. He put his hand over his mouth, and the pressure behind his eyes hit. Slickness crested his lip. He blinked hard and wiped it fast with his sleeve, sniffling into it, but his eyes filled again.

His mother brushed baby hairs behind his ear. "Don't cry here," she murmured, dabbing his cheek. "Crying like that just over a bag of old clothes. Always this sensitive, just like when you were little, remember? Everything made you weep, it's still the same."

How could he explain that it was never about the clothes, but rather everything he couldn't bring? The bag stood in for the battered wok coated with hundreds of family meals, the box of recipe cards splotched with oil stains, the panda key-chain Mu Qing gave him for passing his first medical school exam. None of it was coming with them. It would be cleared away by strangers who'd never know its worth, calling it junk, scraps, not even given to someone who might love it as they had, but discarded, as if erasing their decades together was the tidiest, easiest thing in the world.

"Enough now," his mother said. There was sternness in her small huff. "When we get there, you help with the bags, okay? Your

father’s back isn’t what it was.” Still fussing, still saving him with things to do. She nudged him gently, and the door closed behind them. Their life, a pot left to cool, waiting for morning.

Hua Cheng returned his hands to his lap, fingers fidgeting across the invisible pages that might help him find his words. Xie Lian leaned forward, eager for the words and hands both. Hua Cheng would not give them. Or rather, could not.

This was his sorting process, Xie Lian recognized, allowing nothing of his thinking to hazard the surface unless called for. What would come of Xie Lian, after all, in his existing ruin, if San Lang were not the immovable pillar which he circled?

“San Lang.”

“Mn?”

“Hold me?”

Hua Cheng pulled Xie Lian onto his lap with one arm, cold polish of the table behind them. Hands, brisk and dry and warm, smoothed Xie Lian’s back. His skin shivered, creased shirt drawn flat by fingers working without thinking, that could be tender only in the same mode as coping: by repetition.

Minutes passed. Perhaps longer. Hua Cheng's hands slipped beneath the hem of his shirt, thumb stalling atop the raised scar beneath his ribs. He tilted his head and lowered his chin.

“So that’s where it’s from,” he said.

“It healed, at least,” Xie Lian tried for humor.

This was mostly true, physically. Scar gone pale, expensive lasers making an effort to bleach him, as if the mind might be persuaded to forget what the body had closed around. Most days it only tugged a little, if at all, when he stretched for a shelf too high. But he’d never forgotten it. Sometimes, bitterness slipped slyly into his view of crowds, queues, slow elevators, strangers not meeting his eyes. He disliked the way some part of him lumped people into this interchangeability. Faceless, like those who’d stabbed him. He resisted it best he could, hoping he might be a soft landing for someone else.

Hua Cheng’s laugh, if it was that and not a scoff, made it no further than his chest.

"They cornered you outside a convenience store," he said, and Xie Lian felt the words rumble through his chest. "And you were already injured with a cast on your leg."

Xie Lian’s escape-hatch grace presented itself. “It’s okay,” he insisted. “What’s done is done. Fathers, mothers, children. The virus took a lot from them, and the only face they could put to their suffering was mine. I can't hate them for that.”

"And Jun Wu?" Hua Cheng asked. "Has he ever hurt you?"

Xie Lian thought immediately of the voice at his shoulder, rolling out threats, fingers tugging at the soft of his earlobe. He hesitated, denial on his lips.

"Yes,” he admitted finally. "But not—it's not what you're thinking."

"What am I thinking?"

Xie Lian shifted. The weight of himself in Hua Cheng's lap had become suddenly conspicuous. "It was just hands.”

"Where."

Once here. Once there. Ribs, neck, wrist, chin, knee, forehead. Where hadn’t mattered when anywhere had been once enough. Could an itemized list rinse the aftertaste? That sugar-slick on the tongue, the coat hardening at the back of his teeth. He would catch himself swallowing even when his mouth was empty just to try and rid it of residue.

“A few places.” He tried for offhand.

Hua Cheng’s jaw labored. His thighs set rigid under Xie Lian as if some inner bracing rod had slipped into its notch. The next time his hand moved it was only to resettle, as if, pointlessly, to assure Xie Lian he were fine. A sort of parent-like reflex: *no, not*

angry, never at you. Except that anger vibrated up the whole length of him, his eyes staking out this inch of lap as though it were newly contested ground.

Xie Lian’s fingers twisted the front of Hua Cheng’s shirt. "San Lang… What do I do?"

Hua Cheng zipped away his anger. “Hey, it’s all right.” The thumb returned; this time to the inside of Xie Lian’s wrist, smoothing along veins and bumps of bone. “Don’t worry, gege. We’ll figure something out. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“I did, though. There are legal consequences, San Lang. I’m complicit.” Xie Lian fell out of posture, alert and jittery like a windup thing with the spring run loose.

"Yes, but—" Hua Cheng paused, picking the words. "Don't worry about it, gege."

"Don't worry about it? San Lang, I just told you I've been embezzling—"

"I heard you, and right now there's no point in spiraling about consequences when we don't know what our options are. We'll talk to an attorney first and figure out what we can do.”

Xie Lian stared at him. "Just like that?"

"Just like that. Criminal law isn't my specialty, but I know enough to know that coercion is a real defense. There might be plea deals, immunity agreements, ways to cooperate that minimize your exposure."

"But what if—"

"What if a meteor hits the hospital tomorrow? What if the coffee machine breaks again? We don't know what we don't know yet.”

Xie Lian took a deep breath. "You make it sound simple."

"The first step is simple. We get professional advice from someone who knows what they're talking about. But gege, keep doing everything normally, exactly as you have been."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean keep going to work, keep attending Jun Wu's meetings, act like nothing's changed." Hua Cheng's voice was steady against his will. "If he suspects anything—that you've told someone, that you're planning to resist—he might try to erase evidence and cover his tracks. We need time to build our case first."

"You want me to keep letting him..."

"No. Try to guide the weekly meetings into public places if you can. The cafeteria, conference rooms with windows, restaurants, anywhere there might be other people around." His hands tightened around Xie Lian's.

Xie Lian nodded slowly. "And then what?"

"And then you start digging up dirt. Anything you can find. Save emails. Not just the ones between you two, but anything in your administrative access that looks suspicious."

Xie Lian turned his nose into Hua Cheng's neck and took a deep breath. Outside the window, bullying rain pitted the fire escape.

"San Lang, this is the first time in months I can actually breathe."

***

The bathtub was barely big enough for one person, let alone two, but they'd made it work. Hua Cheng sat with his back against the faucet end, knees drawn up to his chest, while Xie Lian stretched out opposite him, one leg on either side of Hua Cheng's hips. The water had gone lukewarm twenty minutes ago, but neither of them had moved to drain it.

The overhead light was off. Only the small lamp from the bedroom spilled through the doorway, casting everything in honeyed shadows.

"Your foot is freezing," Hua Cheng said as Xie Lian's toe brushed against his thigh.

"Sorry." Xie Lian tried to pull his foot back, but Hua Cheng caught his ankle, pulling it into his lap.

"I didn't say move it." His hands were warm, thumbs working into the arch. "Just making an observation."

The water lapped gently against the sides of the tub as Hua Cheng made room for Xie Lian's foot between his knees. Xie Lian let his head fall back against the tub with a thunk.

"San Lang?"

"Mm?"

“Thank you for not running.”

"Why would I run?"

"Because I'm—" Xie Lian gestured at himself, water sloshing. "A mess. A criminal. A liability."

"You're none of those things."

"I'm a criminal, San Lang.”

"Jun Wu manipulated you into an impossible situation. That's not the same thing."

Xie Lian wanted to list all the ways he could have chosen differently, but the words wouldn't come. Instead, he slunk lower in the tub until the water reached his collarbones.

"The attorney you mentioned," he said eventually. "Do you know someone?"

"I know someone who knows someone."

A few leftover soap bubbles clung to the surface, iridescent in low light. Xie Lian found himself poking at one absently, watching it wobble and stretch before popping. He moved to another cluster, folding them between his fingers until they dissolved.

"What if we can't?" he asked. "What if there's no way out that doesn't end with me in prison?"

"Then we'll deal with that too."

Xie Lian gathered a small collection of bubbles in his palm and blew on them.

Hua Cheng laughed. "Are you having fun over there?"

Xie Lian froze, suddenly aware of himself. "I was—"

"It's cute," Hua Cheng said simply.

Xie Lian's cheeks warmed. He turned his attention back to the few remaining bubbles, popping them one by one.

"San Lang," he said. "I still feel like a bad person."

"Why's that?"

Xie Lian gathered his thoughts. "There was a night, years ago, when everything was falling apart in China. I was sitting on my apartment floor, reading the news about myself, about how I'd supposedly killed all these people, and I found an article about an American military surgeon who'd been taken hostage. I was so grateful, so relieved that someone else was suffering worse than me. I actually thanked him, this stranger I'd never met, for making my pain feel smaller." He looked down at the water. "What kind of person feels grateful for someone else's torture?"

He looked up to Hua Cheng; it was like watching someone arrive, suddenly and without warning, at the famine center of a

realization.

"San Lang...?"

Hua Cheng hovered at the edge of a frown and laugh both.

Xie Lian, mortified, sunk deeper into the water. “Sorry, I know. That’s… I know that makes me horrible. I think about it all the time, and in retrospect—“

"That's not—” Hua Cheng shook his head as if to scatter pieces from his face. “What was the soldier’s name?”

"In the news? Wu Ming.”

Something woozy buoyed up behind Hua Cheng’s eye. He pulled Xie Lian’s foot upward and kissed one of the curled toes.

"San Lang, what is it?”

Hua Cheng tried not to laugh but laughed all the same. His shoulders jumped, setting ripples across the cooled bathwater, circles lapping at Xie Lian’s chest and arms, breaking up the chill with their heat.

“Gege,” he wiped away water on his cheek. “I think you’re talking about me.”

Xie Lian froze, blinking until it made sense. He looked at his hands, pruned beneath the tepid water, and began to cry, hardly recognizable first as tears: a sharp shock in his breath.

He turned blindly towards Hua Cheng. “San Lang, how could I—? How could I ever have wished any of that on you? How could I be grateful that you were—that someone was hurting you like that?"

"Gege, no—"

"I thanked you,” he choked. “I sat there in my apartment feeling sorry for myself and I thanked you for being tortured

because it made my problems seem smaller. What kind of person does that? I read it over and over, over and over—and all I could feel was relief that you—no, not you, I didn't know, but it was you—all that time, you were—" He heaved.

Hua Cheng pulled Xie Lian through the water straight into his lap without care for the slosh.

"Gege, it wasn't—" he fumbled, kissing the top of Xie Lian's head.

"I'm sorry," Xie Lian spasmed, miserable and hoarse. "San Lang, I'm sorry, that was so awful of me. I'm sorry. I'm so, so sorry."

Hua Cheng hushed and rocked him. "It's not your fault, it's not, it isn't. Gege, don't cry." He brushed tears from damp, fevered cheeks. "Of all the people in this world, you're the kindest one I know."

If Xie Lian had a counterpoint, it slid down the drain with the rest of the story. Old water, older days.

The bedside lamp ticked out. Hua Cheng closed in on Xie Lian from behind, tangling their calves and knees, every escape cut off but for the tiniest toe wiggle. The apartment had that boxed-in drift peculiar to late hours, cupboards and pipes muttering. Hua Cheng flattened a palm against Xie Lian's belly under his pajama shirt.

"San Lang," Xie Lian whispered. "What are you thinking about?"

Hua Cheng's thumb dipped into the ravines between ribs. "How soft you are."

"I'm not soft," Xie Lian pouted.

Hua Cheng laughed. He canted his hips, fitting his half-hard cock into the downy cleft of ass.

"I meant the good kind of soft." He kissed Xie Lian's ear; its peachfuzz tickled his lips.

Shyly, Xie Lian nudged his hips back. Hua Cheng palmed the jitter of Xie Lian's stomach and then up, down, up again in a greedy scan, tauting the nerves of a nipple. He kissed his neck and shoulder, burrowing into it like he'd found some patch of sun-softened pine needles to root through.

Xie Lian bit his tongue, and again, tentatively rolled his hips. It was nothing unfamiliar, this hunger of San Lang's; it'd always left him lightheaded and incandescent. He'd learned to meet it gasping. Even in shyness—perhaps especially in shyness—Hua Cheng made him eager. A current drawing Xie Lian into warm shallows, sunning on him, making him tender and turning his shyest edges golden.

Tonight, though, Hua Cheng was strung at his back. Helpless with hunger, Xie Lian thought. Possessive, even, would the word fit, the way his breath stuttered, the rutting hips. Not satisfied with thin air, he yanked Xie Lian back, nudging his tenting cock's tip between the fork of his thighs.

Xie Lian gasped. Head tilting, throat bared, Hua Cheng seized him, nipping and laving, rocking both of them forward.

“I love how sensitive you are, gege. Does it feel good like this?”

Xie Lian nodded helplessly. “Yes—*ah*—San Lang…”

Hua Cheng swept a thumb across his bottom lip. “Open,” he coaxed, and Xie Lian sucked obediently on the two fingers nudging his tongue.

Hua Cheng frisked his hip, the sharp jut of it. "Do you know how beautiful you are? And here—" Up to the scar below his ribs, then past the elastic of his pants, fingers spreading to cup his half-hard dick. “This, too, I love the way you fit in my hands.” He nuzzled the sensitive patch behind Xie Lian’s ear, kissing its shell.

Xie Lian felt himself tip. Hua Cheng’s mouth, the heat of it tickling that fine pelage.

The blankets vanished in a burst, cool night slithering up Xie Lian’s calves and thighs. Hua Cheng pressed him flat to the bed, pajama top rucked to ribs in one immodest yank, kissing and licking his stomach. Startled, Xie Lian grabbed fistfuls of Hua Cheng’s hair. It only made him rougher, lifting Xie Lian’s hips up, nosing eagerly at the dark trail plunging beneath the waistband.

With the street lamp dead, the only thing visible was the wet, reflective glimmer of Xie Lian’s eyes. Soft and unfocused the way they got when he was nearly fucked-out. Hua Cheng wasn’t used to it coming this early.

“You have no idea, gege. That shy way you look at me—how much it makes me want to fuck you.”

He nibbled Xie Lian just above his cock and felt it jump.

"San Lang—"

It was too much too fast. And with it came that old urge: to

run, to laugh delirious, Hua Cheng's open mouth wandering, hunting. And then everything happened quickly. His clothes were gone, and Hua Cheng rolled his tongue against a cherry-tint nipple, perked and eager as the rest of him. Xie Lian lurched to sit. Hua Cheng pushed him back down into the bed and kissed his palm, sending prickles down his forearm and dimpling the skin.

These hands, so patient they embarrass gods, who only ever pretended at such grace.

He kissed the border of hip and belly, a lip of bone.

The corner round which whole worlds turn. Childhood summers, plum juice on sunny fingers. I want to drink the memories from here.

He nosed the gathering sweat on the insides of thighs.

When you twitch in your sleep it's always from here, some memory of fleeing or dancing alone.

He paused, hand splayed right over the heart, and listened.

Here. My favorite.

This is where you broke, but the world, startled, found it more lovely.

A spiderweb ripped during the night, yes, beaten sideways by rain. Yet morning found it. Sunlight slanted through apple branches and set each filament trembling with its catch of dew. Drops strung along wreckage. What was ruined now dazzling: the pearl-beads refracted, throwing pinwheels and rainbows onto mossy stones, onto the hands of anyone who knelt beneath. The gaps in the web; those were what scattered brightness like marbles loose across the world.

Their combined warmth stitched humidity to the sheets and walls. Night oil, city brine, sex musk. Xie Lian's cock throbbed, neglected and weeping while Hua Cheng went over the rest of him once more.

Nipple: tiny bud at spring thaw, fierce and pink and fit to burst;

hummingbird's summer eye.

Again, Hua Cheng kissed that scar.

If people are galaxies, then here is Chiron. Below, a cluster of small constellations, old collisions, healed comet scars. What a map it is. What a journey left.

Then, at last, Hua Cheng took him in his mouth. One hand at the base of Xie Lian's cock, thumb spread to steady the root, the other splayed over his stomach. He shivered, bucking into the wet heat; it was almost too much, lightning skittering below his ribs. His hands scrabbled for the sheets, curling in on the pleasure. Hua Cheng pushed him down again.

"Gege," he said, wiping drool from the corner of his mouth. "Let me."

Xie Lian was earth made new under Hua Cheng's mouth. Tongue clever, curling beneath the head and tracing sensitive veins all the way down. Head bobbing, long hair tickling Xie Lian's hips and thighs, the odd hiss of his own caught breath between the pulls.

Xie Lian felt drool sliding down himself. Deeper, in the root of him, he was too full, too sweet, a persimmon gone thin-skinned on the bough, ready to burst.

He couldn't steady himself, hips jerking off-rhythm. His hands; he found them, mindless, knotted deep in Hua Cheng's hair, tugging on handfuls of midnight. Head thrown back, mouth open to catch November rain; it was the same madness.

He gasped, high and hoarse and almost sobbing, "San Lang—San Lang I'm—I'm—I'm gonna cum, I'm gonna—please—"

He pulled fiercely this time and Hua Cheng let out a thick groan that sent its shivering force curling around the base of Xie Lian's cock. It rattled against the back of his teeth, ricocheted down his spine, blew the last grip from his hands as his body finally gave way and he was, at last, split open.

He gasped, warbling. “San Lang—,” and again, hands drowning in Hua Cheng’s hair like river reeds. His hips rolled up, body begging, trying, against sense or pride, to push further, greedier, deeper. “I’m cumming, ‘m cumming, San Lang—!”

Hua Cheng took him as deep as he could, lips sealed around the base. He swallowed, throat clicking, and Xie Lian could feel its clutch as he came. The swallow tugged at him a last time, a final spurt of cum rekindling pleasure on its way to afterglow.

Loose-lipped, Hua Cheng’s tongue painted heat along the sensitive underside, following the vein.

“A-ah—San Lang—San Lang, stop, I—” Heel thumping the mattress, toes curling to fist bedsheets.

Too much, too much. Instinct sent Xie Lian’s hands scrabbling through Hua Cheng’s hair, roots hunted for comfort in a panicked harvest.

Hua Cheng sucked once, tight around the crown.

“San Lang, please—please, no more—”

He could feel it then: Hua Cheng, grinning around him, that fox-sly joy shaping his lips. He always looked smug when Xie Lian came apart for him.

He drew off, lips swollen, self-satisfied, tongue catching the last bead of cum pearling at the tip. He settled, cheek nestled to the sticky-sweet inside of Xie Lian’s thigh. His hands rode gently upward, trailing shapes in the dark: a thumb stroking from knee to groin, knuckles mapping the length of thigh still quivering. He pressed circles into the outer hip, into the shallow bowl of belly, always soothing, as if stroking a world back into shape.

Xie Lian, still open to the ceiling, took his time learning to breathe again, air moving in brittle little stutters. He clumsily, aimlessly pet Hua Cheng’s hair.

“San Lang,” he slurred, “let me—let me make you cum too.

Come here.”

But Hua Cheng caught his hand, cradled it, and kissed its palm. “No, gege. It’s all right.”

The one-sided acceptance of such worship always pricked Xie Lian. It wasn’t debt, no. He could kneel in gratitude for a thousand years and never clear that river; it was the urge to pour light back into Hua Cheng and close the circle. Loving demanded use, he thought. To leave beauty sitting would rot him from the inside out.

He whined, pouted, and Hua Cheng repeated, “No, gege. It’s really all right,” scattering kisses along his belly, cheek accidentally or not brushing his spent cock.

Xie Lian half-fell, half-crawled to his knees, bloodrush dragging him down as he grabbed Hua Cheng’s face and kissed, foreheads bumping. He reached blindly for Hua Cheng’s cock in his pants, pleasantly weighty, half-hard. Everything in him leaned hungry toward this: to kindle the person he most adored. He worked Hua Cheng’s cock in sure fits and starts, fingers slipping easily with sweat.

Hua Cheng startled, a laugh bitten in half, then a gasp, the protesting “Gege,” swallowed in the crush of mouths returning to each other, desperate to trade what sweetness buzzed in their bodies.

Their lips coaxed sound from one another, spilling down their chins. Xie Lian brought Hua Cheng hard under his hands, humming headily at feeling it thicken and drool. Hua Cheng’s hips lurched into his fist. He caught Xie Lian’s chin between thumb and knuckle, gave it a rough, adoring squeeze, then pried his mouth open wider to get his tongue deeper. He pulled off to fumble with his pants, swearing as they caught his ankle. Kicking them into oblivion, he yanked Xie Lian into his lap and hungry kisses, their breath a forest, one deer bolting, one hunter giving chase.

Hua Cheng’s free hand seized them both, cock to cock, flush against each other’s bodies. By no stretch was Xie Lian himself small; next to Hua Cheng, however, he felt so, its broader head

spilling wet across their bellies. His own cock was only just rousing. They fell into panting, mouths wet and shining with shared breath, moans sticky and lush between teeth. Hua Cheng rolled his hips and Xie Lian met the motion, their dicks sliding together on each thrust.

Xie Lian's cries shuddered into Hua Cheng's mouth, muffled to a trembling hum. He clung to Hua Cheng's shoulder as if he might fall, his other palm pressed flat to his abs, muscle ridges flexing.

Absurd, even now: Hua Cheng, who spent more than half his life in the hospital, yet found time to maintain a body like this. Xie Lian's foggy, fucked-out mind could only marvel in passing: *When does a surgeon sleep, let alone sculpt themselves into a war god?*

Hua Cheng drove his hips up, dicks slipping together in his fist. His other arm wound around Xie Lian's back and pinned him to his chest.

Xie Lian squirmed, quite shy, as if requesting the sun to come up a little earlier. "San Lang, *ah*, could you—um, I—I want—inside, can you—"

"*Fuck*, gege."

Without letting Xie Lian slip off his lap, Hua Cheng haphazardly reached into the nightstand, fingers scrabbling for the lube bottle, knocking spare coins and hair ties to the ground. Lube cool against palm, the first finger slipped in, parting him, the magic not in the slide but in the friction, the slow curl. Then a second joined. Still holding Xie Lian's cock against his own, Hua Cheng stroked them both in his fist, grinding and trembling and fucking his fingers inside.

"Ah—ahh, f—San Lang—" Xie Lian rocked between Hua Cheng's fingers and fist, knuckles flexing, twisting, stretching him open.

Hua Cheng sucked a bruise into the slab of Xie Lian's shoulder muscle. "Gege," he groaned. "I'm—fuck, I'm close—"

Xie Lian cupped Hua Cheng's jaw, forced him to look.

"San Lang, San Lang," he panted, blinking hard. "Cum with me, I want you to cum with me. Please, please. Cum with me, cum with me—"

Between his palms, Hua Cheng turned soft, shockingly so, the bite and granite of him fallen away as he came with a ragged groan. His lips parted, sucking in air. The hard lines of his jaw ditched all their arrogance for pink flush and scrunched brows.

He, Xie Lian, such a little king of empty pockets, was made so absurdly, incomprehensibly rich, glutted on the body and face opening for him between his hands. You could lay gold before him and he would say—no, I already have too much. I am heavy with all the ways this man undoes me and swells me back into myself. My hunger, my longing, fed on love so abundant the world seemed nothing but green bounty. It made his belly tighter, eyes wetter, heart riotous. If he ever starved, he was certain now it would be for want of space, not abundance.

Orgasm threw his hips into Hua Cheng's hand, voice tossed high. "H—ahh, San Lang—!" And Hua Cheng thrust his fingers deep, Xie Lian's hole fluttering, wringing them. Release tumbled wild down their nerves. Both their dicks jerked, spilling hotly over Hua Cheng's knuckles.

But the world funneled to Hua Cheng's eye; Xie Lian watched climax gulp him under. A woozy gala shone in him, lanterns bobbing in a cider dusk.

***

I keep finding myself startled by it.

Strange, isn't it?

I am so

so

so

full

(Hard to breathe from sweetness,

imagine, being suffocated by peaches!)

it keeps moving outwards, spilling, filling

up all the old corners,

edges I was keeping empty, just in case,

until there's nowhere left for doubt

(Did you see? Nowhere left.)

So I'm telling you,

if you're listening—

full,

did you hear?

All the way full,

from you.

Xie Lian was saving the latest batch of invoices when his office door burst open.

"Bestie!" Shi Qingxuan announced, clutching his pink Stanley. "I had five minutes and I was like, you know what? I need to check on my favorite administrative king."

"Qingxuan," Xie Lian said, hand at his chest. "You scared me."

"Sorry, pookie!" Shi Qingxuan collapsed into the visitor chair sideways, one leg draped over the armrest while the other foot tucked beneath his thigh. "But seriously, how are you holding up? You look..." He tilted his head. "Better?"

“Better.”

Shi Qingxuan took a long pull from his cup. "Better is good. Nursing school is literally going to be my thirteenth reason. Like, I thought working here was hard, but studying while also working? I'm basically existing on caffeine at this point."

Xie Lian leaned back in his chair. "How are your classes going?"

"Oh my god, don't get me started. Actually, no, do get me started because I need to vent." Shi Qingxuan straightened up. "So we had this clinical yesterday, right? Pediatric ward. And I'm thinking, okay, I work with sick people all day, how hard can it be? WRONG. These tiny humans are built different, Xie-ge. Like, their veins are the size of angel hair pasta, and they cry, and the parents are hovering, and my instructor is breathing down my neck like I'm about to accidentally unalive someone."

"Did you manage okay?"

"I mean, define okay. Nobody died on my watch, which feels like a win? But this one kid, maybe seven years old, looks at me with these huge eyes and goes, 'Are you new? You seem nervous.' OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES! A literal child clocked my imposter syndrome.”

"Children are observant." Xie Lian smiled.

"Too observant! But whatever, I survived. And then I had to come back here for my shift, and let me tell you, dealing with He Xuan's attitude was... a choice. But enough about my academic suffering. How's the whole administrative thing treating you? Still weird being on this side of the hospital?"

Xie Lian's fingers drummed against his desk. "It's... still an adjustment."

Oh, you know, he thought, *just the usual learning curve. Figuring out the filing system, getting familiar with hospital protocols, investigating my boss for fraud while simultaneously being his accomplice in embezzling millions of dollars so I can hopefully build enough evidence to secure a plea deal when the FBI inevitably arrests us both.*

"Yeah, I bet," Shi Qingxuan said sympathetically. Then, his eyebrows shot up. "Oh! Speaking of stress, do you know why Jun Wu looked like someone peed in his artisan coffee this morning? I saw him in the lobby and he had that face. You know the one."

"He seemed upset?"

"Upset? Uh, yeah." Shi Qingxuan leaned forward. "I heard from Xuan Ji, who heard from security, that someone slashed his tires this morning."

"What?"

"I know, right? His precious Cybertruck got violated in the parking lot. All four tires, shredded. And if you ask me? Not a loss. That thing is UGLY. Like, ugly-ugly. It looks like someone drew a truck on an Etch-a-Sketch. You know what else is ugly? Those Labubu keychains everyone's obsessed with right now. Like, I don't get it. They're literally designed to be ugly. That's the whole point. But then people spend thirty dollars on these crusty little troll dolls and act like they're cute?"

He slumped, arm draped over the chair's back. "I saw three

nursing students with them clipped to their bags yesterday. Three! And they're all like 'isn't he so adorable?' No, bestie, he looks like he crawled out of a storm drain. The same way Jun Wu's truck looks like it crawled out of a sci-fi movie from 2003."

"What's a Labubu?" Xie Lian asked.

Shi Qingxuan lit up. He pulled out his phone, swiping through several images.

"Look at this monstrosity," he said, holding the phone out.

Xie Lian squinted at the screen like a grandfather trying to read a menu. "I... what is that?"

"EXACTLY!" Shi Qingxuan threw his free hand up. "It's so ugly! But somehow people are like 'uwu so precious' and spending their rent money on these things."

Xie Lian squinted harder. "It looks... unwell."

“Apparently that's the appeal? I don't understand this generation, and I AM this generation."

Xie Lian hummed, processing. "Well, I should probably head to lunch. I'm meeting San Lang."

"Ooh, lunch date?"

"We usually eat lunch together.”

"You guys are so cute," Shi Qingxuan said. "Actually, speaking of lunch dates, I should go find He Xuan and see if I can convince him to eat something that isn't vending machine chips.”

"Good luck," Xie Lian called after him.

He saved his work and locked his computer screen. He gathered his things: work badge, phone, a small container of mints in his desk drawer. The surgeon break room was quiet when he arrived. Hua Cheng sat at a table in the corner, feet propped up and

crossed at the ankles. He was scrolling through his phone with one hand while the other rested casually behind his head. Two containers of homemade dumplings sat next to his coffee.

"There you are," Hua Cheng said looking up. He stood to pull out Xie Lian's chair. "I was starting to think Ling Wen had buried you in paperwork."

"Close. Shi Qingxuan stopped by to complain about nursing school and show me pictures of something called a Labubu." Xie Lian settled into his seat, accepting the container slid across to him. "He says they're intentionally ugly?"

“Some of my nurses have those clipped to their bags.” Hua Cheng's face scrunched up.

Xie Lian opened the container and rich ginger hit him immediately. "San Lang, these look incredible." He took a bite of the dumpling and nearly moaned. "The filling is perfect. How’s work so far?"

Hua Cheng smiled, a bit smug, and popped the top to his own container, picking one with his fingers. "Better now. Long morning in trauma, but nothing too complicated. What about you?"

Xie Lian swallowed before answering. "It’s fine. Actually, I volunteered to help run the children's cancer fundraising table out in front of the hospital this evening, so they agreed to end my shift early."

"That's nice of you," Hua Cheng said. “"Oh, this morning Pei Ming cornered one of my trauma nurses."

“What did she say?"

"She told him she was married to a woman and walked away, but then he asked if they were looking for a third."

Xie Lian laughed. "Poor woman." He reached for Hua Cheng's coffee and stole a sip. "Hey, San Lang."

"What's up?"

Xie Lian set down his chopsticks. "I heard Jun Wu's tires got slashed this morning. My San Lang wouldn't happen to know who did it, would he?"

Hua Cheng leaned back and crossed his arms, a perfect picture of innocence. "I have no idea, gege. Who would do such a thing?"

Xie Lian tilted his head, giving him a look. "Are you sure? No idea at all?"

Hua Cheng sucked his cheeks in, fighting back a smile. "Nope. Complete mystery."

"Really? Because Shi Qingxuan said it happened early this morning."

"Terrible timing. I was getting ready for work."

"Were you?"

"Getting my coffee, checking my schedule. You know how busy mornings are, gege."

"Hmm, and you definitely didn't happen to take an early morning detour through the parking lot?"

"Why would I do that?" Hua Cheng picked up another dumpling.

"San Lang."

"Gege."

They stared at each other, Hua Cheng coy and smug, while Xie Lian tried not to laugh.

"You're terrible at lying," Xie Lian finally said.

"I have no idea what you mean." Hua Cheng popped the dumpling into Xie Lian's mouth.

Xie Lian laughed, almost choked. "Be careful. I don't want you getting in trouble."

"No one saw." Hua Cheng shrugged.

"Yeah, but what about security camera footage?"

"I had He Xuan delete it."

"What?"

"He knows the security guards. They owed him a favor." Hua Cheng sipped coffee.

"Huh. Oh..." Xie Lian processed this, then: "Wait, you just confessed!"

Hua Cheng laughed, that deep, chest-shaking sort that made his eye twinkle.

"San Lang!" Xie Lian reached over and jabbed him in the armpit. He jerked away with a yelp.

"Hey! You can't use my weaknesses against me." Hua Cheng grinned and wrapped his arms around himself defensively.

"You're impossible," Xie Lian said, but he was smiling, shaking his head in amazement. "I can't believe you actually did it. And I can't believe you got He Xuan to help you cover it up."

"He was enthusiastic about it, actually." Hua Cheng sat up tall, smoothing down his red scrubs. "He's had his own run-ins with Jun Wu."

Xie Lian tutted. "No more of that. I'm serious. What if next time you get caught?"

"Whatever gege wants," Hua Cheng said easily.

"I mean it."

"I know you do." Hua Cheng softened. "Gege, I have a question."

"Of course," Xie Lian said, picking up another dumpling with his chopsticks.

"When you moved to America, you came with Feng Xin and your parents, right? So when did Mu Qing move here?"

Xie Lian chewed thoughtfully, tilting his head this way and that as though it weren't a ready response. "A few months after we did. His mother passed away not long after the whole... situation with me blew up, so he immigrated to avoid political pressure. I think staying in China would have been too difficult for him, especially after losing her."

"So he followed you here."

"He came here to start over," Xie Lian corrected gently.

Hua Cheng picked at a dumpling as though Mu Qing were folded in it. "Yet somehow he ended up with a good residency program."

"He worked hard for it."

"I'm sure he did," Hua Cheng said, though his tone suggested he wasn't entirely convinced of Mu Qing's noble suffering.

***

Xie Lian stood outside the pathology department. He knocked on He Xuan's office door.

"Dr. He?"

No response, though he could hear something coming from inside. Music? No, not music. He tried the handle. Unlocked. He pushed the door open and stopped dead in his tracks. The office

was completely dark. From a Bose speaker on the windowsill came water dripping sounds, amplified and echoing as though deep underground in a limestone cavern.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"Dr. He?" Xie Lian called again.

He Xuan’s disheveled head popped up from behind the desk. "What.”

"I... Jun Wu asked me to pick up some administrative files? He said you had quarterly reports that—"

"XIEEEE-GE!"

Another head popped up from behind the desk. Shi Qingxuan, equally tousled.

Xie Lian blinked. "Oh. Hi, Qingxuan."

"Hi!" Shi Qingxuan waved brightly. "What brings you to our humble cave?"

“Your cave?”

"That's what I call it," Shi Qingxuan explained, climbing out from behind the desk with He Xuan slow behind. "Very atmospheric down here, don't you think?"

Xie Lian looked between them. He Xuan was adjusting his coat collar. Shi Qingxuan was smoothing down his hair. "Were you studying?"

"Yes!" Shi Qingxuan said immediately.

"No," He Xuan said at the same time.

"We were taking a break from studying," Shi Qingxuan amended.

Xie Lian failed to understand many things. He didn't understand why the hospital's coffee machines required a PhD in engineering to operate. He didn't understand why Pei Ming still had a job at this hospital (or anywhere, for that matter). He didn't understand why anyone would voluntarily spend thirty dollars on a Labubu keychain or the American healthcare system's byzantine insurance requirements. But give Xie Lian this: he did, for a fact, understand that whatever He Xuan and Shi Qingxuan had been doing behind that desk was anything other than studying for nursing school exams.

Xie Lian cleared his throat. "I mean, I can come back later if this was a bad time. Sorry, I shouldn't have just barged in—"

"It's fine," He Xuan said, yanking open the second drawer of a filing cabinet. "You need quarterly reports?"

"Yes, Director Jun said you had them ready."

He Xuan rifled through manila folders. Meanwhile, Shi Qingxuan had dropped to his hands and knees, crawling around the floor and peering under furniture.

"Stanley? Where are you, Stanley?" he whispered to the ground like he was calling a lost pet.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

"Found it!" Shi Qingxuan emerged from under a chair clutching his cup. "Crisis averted."

He Xuan pulled out a thick stack of papers and dropped them into Xie Lian’s arms.

"Thank you," Xie Lian said. He hesitated. "What's with the cave noises, though?"

"They help me concentrate.”

"On what?"

"Work."

Xie Lian decided he'd heard enough. "Well, I'll leave you to your concentration. Ah… Thank you for the files."

As he walked down the hallway, the cave ambiance increased in volume. The deep, resonant dripping sounds vibrating through the door, up the walls, and rattling the nearest light fixture.

Xie Lian paused, looking back. What kind of speaker system did He Xuan have in there? Why did he have it in there? Why did anyone *let* him? Was it not a disturbance? Then again, everyone in this wing of the hospital was, for the most part, dead, so complaints were probably minimal. He shook his head and continued toward the elevator.

***

Xie Lian peeled stickers from their backing and into chubby child-sized palms: tigers, stars, a shy, off-model SpongeBob. Daisy flowers stippled his cheekbones; at his temple, a peach blossom branch. The face paint had been Shi Qingxuan's idea, and while Xie Lian had first felt foolish, the children had seemed to love it.

The last sun smeared the corners of the hospital plaza gold and red, as if the sky had misbelieved spring for summer and melted over every unlikely balloon bobbing over the cluster of folding tables. A few volunteers had set up stations: Feng Xin was manning a ring toss game with prizes donated by local businesses, while several nurses from pediatrics had organized a bake sale featuring cookies decorated like band-aids and cancer awareness ribbons.

Xie Lian removed his remaining fliers from the "Hope for Heroes" placard, tucking them into a manila folder along with the donation forms. The fundraiser was winding down. Volunteers dismantling tables, deflating balloons that had fought the good fight against the evening breeze.

"Need help with anything?" Feng Xin appeared at his elbow, carrying a box. Behind him, Mu Qing, hands in his pockets.

"I think I'm good. Just need to drop these donation forms off."

"The flowers are a good look on you," Feng Xin said. "Going to show them off to Dr. Hua?"

"Maybe," Xie Lian said, unsure why the question felt loaded.

Feng Xin hefted his box higher. "We were thinking of getting dinner later. That Thai place you like."

"Oh, I can't tonight. San Lang and I—"

"Right. Of course. San Lang."

"What about tomorrow?"

"Tomorrow is…" Xie Lian hesitated. "Hot pot."

"Thursday?" Mu Qing asked. "That is, if you don't have to ask for permission first."

"I don't have to ask for permission," Xie Lian said defensively.

"Right."

Feng Xin shifted his weight. "Remember when you used to just show up places without coordinating every movement with another human being?"

"I coordinate things because I'm in a relationship now. That's what people do."

"I'm pretty sure most people can grab coffee without filing a flight plan."

"I'm sorry that I've been neglectful. I promise we'll find a time to get together this week. Or next week at the latest." He started gathering papers absently. "How have you both been? I feel like I haven't really talked to either of you in forever." He looked up

at Feng Xin. "How's Jian Lan?"

Feng Xin's face went tight. He started fidgeting with the corner of his box.

"She doesn't want the baby," Mu Qing said. "And she dumped him."

"Hey—"

"What? It's true. Everyone already knows she wants nothing to do with it, but our noble martyr here insisted he wanted to keep it."

"It's not that simple."

"Isn't it? Seems pretty cut and dry."

"She's scared, okay? She's figuring out her career—"

"Right. You want to be a single father working twelve-hour shifts. That sounds reasonable."

"It's the right thing to do."

"The right thing for who? Your ego?"

"My ego?" Feng Xin nearly threw his box. "What does my ego have to do with anything?"

"You can't stand the idea that someone doesn't want to be saved by you. Just like how you couldn't stand the idea of Xie Lian —"

"Hey," Xie Lian interrupted. "I'm standing right here."

"You're literally the one who got him a job as a janitor at Tonglu," Feng Xin shot back at Mu Qing.

"That's different."

"How is it different?"

Xie Lian held up his hands. "Okay, let's just—"

"It's different because I actually think things through before I act," Mu Qing said sharply.

"Right, like how much thinking you did before you snuck out at six AM?"

Mu Qing's face went white, then red. "We're not discussing that."

"I should go drop these off," Xie Lian said softly, gathering his papers and backing away.

Behind him, he could still hear them:

"At least I didn't spend the entire evening acting like—"

"Oh, so now it's my fault that you—"

He quickened his pace toward the hospital entrance.

"Xie Lian!" One of the pediatric nurses waved him over from the bake sale table. "Wait up!"

She jogged over, pressing a tidy cardboard box toward him, cookies stacked with uneven fondant and sugar sparkles. "We didn't sell all of these. Want to take some? You worked so hard today."

"Are you sure?”

"Please, take them. Otherwise they'll just go stale if we take them back upstairs.”

"Thank you," he said, and knew exactly who to share them with.

***

The emergency department was halfway through shift change when Xie Lian pushed through the automatic door. He spotted Hua Cheng immediately. Red scrubs near the central station commanding a clutch of residents; just his presence made their spines line up and pencils appear.

"—and if you can't manage basic triage protocols," Hua Cheng was saying, "perhaps you should reconsider whether medicine is the right field for you."

One of the residents, a young woman who couldn't have been more than twenty-five, looked close to tears. "Dr. Hua, I was just trying to—"

"You were trying to discharge a patient with rebound tenderness because his white count was normal," Hua Cheng interrupted. "What percentage of appendicitis cases present with a normal white blood cell count in the first twelve hours?"

The resident's mouth opened and closed. "I... I don't..."

"Fifteen to twenty percent. Which you'd know if you'd read Harrison's instead of whatever cliff notes you're using to get through your rotation." His gaze swept the group. "You, what's the most common cause of death in missed appendicitis cases?"

The addressed resident jittered, hands twitching limp at her waist. "Um... sepsis?"

"Peritonitis leading to septic shock, yes. And you—" He found a third body cowering into the periphery, blanched and anxious. "What's the average malpractice settlement for a missed appendix?"

"I don't know that either."

"Two point four million dollars. But I'm sure your patient would be comforted to know that while you're bankrupting the hospital, at least you saved fifteen minutes on your documentation. Since you seem so confident in your clinical judgment, why don't you explain to me the difference between McBurney's point tenderness and Rovsing's sign?"

"They're both... signs of appendicitis?"

"Brilliant. Truly groundbreaking analysis. Maybe you can enlighten us about the significance of a negative psoas sign in a patient with right lower quadrant pain?"

The resident looked panicked. "It... rules out appendicitis?"

"It rules out retrocecal appendicitis, not appendicitis entirely. The fact that none of you know this tells me you're treating symptoms instead of understanding pathophysiology." He glanced at his phone. "I suggest you spend your post-call time reviewing differential diagnoses instead of whatever it is you normally do with your free time."

That was their cue. An exhale, and the pack dissipated, white coats puddling out in all directions.

Hua Cheng melted, fatigued, but as spotlights found Xie Lian and the cardboard tucked into his ribs, it was as though water returned to send a bloom up through city concrete.

“There you are,” Hua Cheng said, revived. “Did it go well?”

"Good. We raised about three thousand for pediatric oncology." Xie Lian held up the box. "And I brought you something."

At that moment, a resident came barreling around the corner —elbows pinning back a half-dozen patient charts, blood bag swinging—when his foot caught on the wheel of a nearby crash cart. He stumbled and the bag hit the floor with a splat. Those bags were supposed to be nearly indestructible, but this one split open, spraying in all directions.

Before Xie Lian could flinch, Hua Cheng stepped in to block him.

He flicked blood speckling from his cheek with the side of his thumb. “Are you *neither*-handed?” he snapped at the resident.

The boy fumbled, paper crinkling under his arms. Someone

at the nurses' station started snapping on gloves, sighing.

"I—Dr. Hua, I'm so sorry, I didn't see—"

"Clearly. Tell me, what's the protocol for transporting blood products?"

The resident's face went pale. "Two hands, secure grip, clear path—"

"And yet here you are, juggling patient charts." Hua Cheng stepped closer, and the resident took a step back. "Do you know what happens when a patient with a hemoglobin of six doesn't get their transfusion on time?"

"They... they could become unstable?"

"They could die."

"It won't happen again—"

"No, it won't. Because you're going to walk—not run, *walk*—back to the blood bank and request a replacement unit. Then you're going to transport it properly."

The resident nodded frantically and hurried away, this time moving at a reasonable pace with his charts clutched properly against his chest.

From behind the nurses' station came a low whistle.

"Damn, boss," Nurse Zhu called out. "We should start calling you 'Crimson Rain Sought Flower.'" He gestured toward Xie Lian. "Look at that—protecting our flower boy here with his pretty painted daisies."

Hua Cheng ignored him. He tilted his head like a hound seeking Xie Lian's affections. "What's in the box?"

"Cookies from the fundraiser. The pediatric nurses couldn't sell them all." Xie Lian lifted the lid to show. "I thought maybe

you'd want some. For later. I was thinking..." Hesitation, here. "Maybe we could do something tonight. Watch a movie? Order takeout? I know it's not hot pot night, but—"

"You don't need an excuse to spend time with me."

Xie Lian sometimes needed one, he felt, to fortify himself.

“I know,” he said. “I just… sometimes worry I’m too much.”

One of Hua Cheng’s brows rose. “Too much for me?”

At that moment, Yin Yu appeared at Hua Cheng's elbow, winded. "Dr. Hua, I got the surgical schedules you wanted—" He took in the scene: scrubs soaked with blood.

"What happened here? Arterial bleed?"

"Someone dropped a blood bag," Xie Lian explained.

“At least it blends with your scrubs, Dr. Hua,” said Yin Yu. “Bit of foresight in uniform planning.”

Hua Cheng turned his head toward him. You could hear it like a millstone turning: the grave patience of deciding whether to dignify the remark at all.

Yin Yu, regrettably, did not notice.

“When you order new red scrubs,” he persisted, “maybe get pockets lined in—”

The stare Hua Cheng gave him was still, flat, and so coldly vacant it lent the feeling of a shutter slamming in an unlit room.

“I’ll—just leave these here.” Yin Yu deposited the schedules and retreated without looking back.

***

Xie Lian was holding the cookie box when they pushed

through the main hospital entrance. The doors sighed shut behind them, sealing the disinfectant inside and trading it for exhaust fumes. Two police cruisers idled at the parking garage mouth. The lights—red, blue, red—bathing everything in intervals. A small crowd had gathered: off-duty nurses, a few security guards, strangers drawn into the crowd by a lapse in better judgment.

Before they could look, they heard it.

"I DIDN'T DO IT! FUCK YOU! FUCK ALL OF YOU! GET YOUR HANDS OFF ME! I'M A DOCTOR!"

"Sir, you need to calm down—"

"I'M BEING FALSELY ACCUSED!"

Hua Cheng and Xie Lian exchanged a look.

Qi Rong, of course, was the center of it all, hands cuffed behind his back, face red and spittle flying as he screamed at two officers flanking him.

"Sir, you're under suspicion of property damage," one officer explained for the fifth repetition, if his weary tone was evidence. "Specifically, vandalism of a vehicle in this parking facility."

"I TOLD YOU, I WASN'T EVEN HERE THIS MORNING!"

"According to the hospital security, you were seen on the premises—"

"SECURITY CAN KISS MY ASS! I WAS AT THE FARMER'S MARKET SELLING HEALING CRYSTALS!"

"Sir, we have witness testimony—"

"WITNESSES? WHAT WITNESSES? THE SAME PEOPLE WHO WON'T LET ME PRACTICE MEDICINE IN THIS HOSPITAL?"

The second officer stepped forward. "Sir, if you continue to resist—"

"I'M NOT RESISTING, I'M EXPRESSING MY CONSTITUTIONAL RIGHTS!"

This was supplemented, badly, by an attempt at kicking shins.

"Okay, now you're resisting," the first officer said.

"FASCIST PIG!" Qi Rong launched another kick. It went wide, swinging him off-balance. "I KNOW MY RIGHTS! I HAVE A DOCTORATE!"

"Sir, please—"

"FROM A REAL UNIVERSITY! NOT SOME COMMUNITY COLLEGE BULLSHIT LIKE WHATEVER SECURITY GUARD ACADEMY YOU DICKHEADS CRAWLED OUT OF!"

The second officer stepped forward, hand moving toward his belt. "Sir, we need you to calm down."

"CALM DOWN? CALM DOWN?! YOU WANT ME TO CALM DOWN WHILE YOU'RE ARRESTING AN INNOCENT MAN?"

He lunged, attempting to headbutt the first officer. The laws of leverage, as applied to a man in cuffs, were not on his side.

"That's it," the officer muttered, retrieving pepper spray. "Sir, step back or—"

"OR WHAT?"

PSSSSHHHHT.

Mace caught him full face. For three seconds, there was blissful silence. Then: "AHHHHHHH FUCK FUCK FUCK—" He staggered, eyes streaming. "YOU—*cough*—YOU SONS OF BITCHES! I'M CALLING MY LAWYER! MY EYES! OH GOD, MY BEAUTIFUL EYES! DO YOU KNOW HOW MUCH MY FACE IS WORTH? I'M AN INFLUENCER! I HAVE FOLLOWERS ON TIKTOK!"

"What is this guy on?" the first officer muttered.

"This isn't working," said the second officer as Qi Rong rebounded at him shoulder-first. "Should we call for backup?"

"BACKUP? CALL THE NATIONAL GUARD! CALL THE PRESIDENT! CALL—*hack*—MY COUSIN, HE'LL KICK ALL YOUR ASSES!"

Both officers had enough. They rushed and tackled Qi Rong to the pavement. The first officer planted a knee on his back while the second pinned his legs.

"GET OFF ME! GET THE FUCK OFF ME!" Qi Rong's voice was pavement-muffled, though remarkably, not quieter. "THIS IS POLICE BRUTALITY! I'M RECORDING THIS!"

"Unit 47 to dispatch. Requesting medical assistance at Tonglu General. Suspect is uncooperative and needs sedation."

"Copy, 47. EMS en route."

The first officer looked over at his partner. "Well, at least our crackhead for the day decided to act up right outside a hospital. Makes our job easier."

"I'M NOT A CRACKHEAD! I'M AN ENTREPRENEUR!"

"Sure you are, buddy," the second officer said, adjusting his grip as Qi Rong tried to buck them off.

"I AM! I HAVE MULTIPLE REVENUE STREAMS!”

"By selling rocks and oils?" the first officer asked, genuinely curious.

"THEY'RE NOT ROCKS, THEY'RE CRYSTALS! AND I DO LIFE COACHING! AND CRYPTO!”

"Wow. Real Wolf of Wall Street over here."

"FUCK YOU!"

Within minutes, a tired-looking nurse emerged from the hospital carrying a small medical bag. She took one look at the scene and sighed deeply.

"Let me guess," she said to the officers. "He won't calm down?"

"We maced him and he's still going strong," the second officer explained. "Is that... normal?"

"Nothing about this guy is normal," the nurse muttered, pulling on latex gloves. "Qi Rong, isn't it? Yeah, we know him. He's been banned from the property for months." She brought out a pre-filled syringe. "Hold him still. This'll take about thirty seconds to kick in."

"WHAT'S IN THAT? WHAT ARE YOU INJECTING ME WITH? I HAVE ALLERGIES!

"It's just a mild sedative," she assured, trying to find a spot on his upper arm.

"SEDATIVE?! SEDATIVE?! EEEEEEAAAAAAHHHHH-AAAAAAHHHHHHH!" His voice reached a pitch that made several car alarms go off in the parking lot. "I DON'T CONSENT! I DON'T CONSENT!"

"Jesus Christ," the first officer winced. "Can he get any louder?"

Accepting the challenge, Qi Rong drew breath. Laboriously, conspicuously, like a vaudeville tenor about to break glass.

"AAAAAAHHHHHHH-COCKSUCKER-MOTHERFUCKER-PIECE-OF-SHIT-GOVERNMENT-DICKWEASELS-AAAAAAHHHHHHH!"

The needle went in.

"POISON! POISON!”

"There we go," the nurse shouted.

He was slurring now, but profanity was still finding its exit intact. “You—you—FUUUUUCK YOUUUUU AND YOUR WHORE MOTHERS—think you can—can just—"

"Uh-huh," the second officer said, getting him upright.

"Think he'll remember any of this when he wakes up?"

"Oh, he'll remember," the nurse said pleasantly.

At last Qi Rong was guided—or dragged, as cooperation and sobriety were not on the table—toward the patrol car.

“NOOOOOOOOOOOO! NOT THE CAGE!”

They managed to get him seated, but as soon as his feet were inside, he started kicking weakly at the door.

Thump, thump, thump.

"I'm—I'm gonna—gonna kick your—your asses—"

Thump, thump.

“Sir, you need to stop kicking," the second officer said, trying to close the door.

"Jesus, what did you give him?" asked the first, glancing at the nurse. "Saline?"

"Standard dose of Ativan. Should have knocked him out by now." The nurse shook her head.

The door was jammed home at last and secured; the howls became only an underwater pounding of sound.

Beside Xie Lian, Hua Cheng leaned in. “You know,” he said,

“I’m impressed.”

Xie Lian had covered his face entirely, as if renouncing any claim upon the moment. “Maybe he’s developed a tolerance? I mean, they sedated him last week too when he got into a fight with an officer for trespassing.”

“Ah.” Hua Cheng said. “That explains it. Building up resistance through regular exposure.”

“This is embarrassing,” Xie Lian said into his palms.

“Why? You didn’t do anything.”

A security guard broke off from a knot of colleagues and came over; a worn look about the eyes suggested the day had already run him ragged. “Dr. Hua, Mr. Xie. Did you see any of what happened this morning? With Director Jun’s vehicle?”

“This morning?” Hua Cheng said. “No, I was in surgery prep.”

The guard, unsatisfied but unwilling to press, left to seek better witnesses.

“San Lang,” said Xie Lian, quiet now.

“Mm?”

“You’re terrible.”

"I have no idea what you mean, gege." Perhaps not. His eye suggested otherwise.

***

They made for the car together. Doors shut, both of them took a deep, steadying breath at the same time, then looked at each other and tilted into a laugh.

“Well,” Xie Lian said, turning the key. “That was eventful.”

"Eventful is one word for it." Hua Cheng slumped back against the headrest, adjusting his long legs in the cramped space.

The engine came to life. Hua Cheng kept still for a moment, his head leaning against the support, then rolled it just far enough to see him. A tired look traveled across to Xie Lian before the hand did. The pad of his thumb drew a line over Xie Lian’s cheek and its little painted daisy.

"These are cute, you know."

"The face paint?" Xie Lian's cheek warmed. "Shi Qingxuan insisted that the kid’s would like it.”

A smile. “Flowers suit gege."

***

They drove without the radio past shop fronts with paper signs curling at the edges, chain-lit awnings, mild litter skating against the curb. Somewhere, a fryer vented out towards them, old oil and malt vinegar creeping in as they idled at a stoplight. From the cross street, a bus slid past, its windows ribbed with movement: elbows, shopping bags, a child’s forehead pressed to glass. Hua Cheng’s hand came up onto Xie Lian’s thigh and squeezed gently.

***

At the apartment: a stack of unopened mail on the table; on top, a single yellow post-it in Hua Cheng’s awful handwriting; shoes, kicked off in different directions. The air smelled of warm dust, and just beyond that, chili oil from an apartment down the hall.

Xie Lian turned toward the sink, rolling up his sleeves. “I should wash this paint off before dinner.”

“Absolutely not. I’m documenting this for posterity first.” Hua Cheng was grabbing his phone before Xie Lian could even face him.

“San Lang, you can’t—” He got as far as this before the little blink of the camera caught him, mouth open mid-case.

“Perfect.” Hua Cheng smiled down at his phone. He turned it so Xie Lian could see: daisies, pleating where the skin moved, as if they too had been taught his crooked smile.

Xie Lian huffed. “You are—”

“Yes?” Hua Cheng’s eyebrow lifted.

“—very annoying.”

“And yet,” Hua Cheng said, thumbing the photo into a folder. “You seem to enjoy it.”

***

They were sitting at the table. Hua Cheng had cooked; the quarter-empty saucepan cooling on its coaster, and the coriander smell, which had twined with wood floor polish.

Xie Lian cupped his bowl and ate. At some point, without planning, he asked: “What was your time in the military like, San Lang?”

Hua Cheng went on chewing. When he stopped, it was to spear another piece, allowing the answer to circle his head and find its own way out. Finally, he shrugged. “Well, I'm missing an eye now, which sucks. It's not a very interesting story." Hua Cheng took another bite, as if the conversation could be redirected by this. "Sand, heat, people trying to kill you. The usual."

Xie Lian’s chopsticks paused above his rice. “What about when you were—” He made a small, uncertain shape in the air with one hand. “You know… Was that…?”

Not necessary, was it, to clarify: *when you were captured.*

Hua Cheng kept chewing. “A mess,” he said. “If that’s what you’re asking.”

Xie Lian lowered his eyes to his bowl, pushing a lone shard of carrot through the broth with the tip of a chopstick. He wasn't embarrassed. Just—he could picture the unpicturable well enough.

Under the table, something caught his ankle and nudged, once, enough to break the line of thought, pull his eyes up to Hua Cheng. That grin of his, warmed lazy by lamplight, one thumb rolling idly along the curve of his water glass.

"Gege," he said, almost chiding, "don't go weaving stories in your head. I'll tell you the real thing some other time."

***

They were on the couch, light off. The television threw glitch-blue over what it could reach: the table's far corner, Hua Cheng's knee, the blanket. Some movie was on, busying itself without help from either of them. Xie Lian was asleep, cheek cushioned against Hua Cheng's thigh. The thin rise and fall of his breath matched the shifting screen light; nothing else in the room cared to move.

Hua Cheng's hand played laxly with Xie Lian's hair, his other palm rubbing circles into shoulders. On this low volume, without Xie Lian talking and without the little interruptions of his own to answer, the dark seemed open, voices from the television smudges of rhythm more than recognizable speech.

The fall inward for Hua Cheng was easy. So easy it disguised itself as peace. At first it was like leaning back within his own outline, roomy enough. Then those back steps he sometimes took without noticing, one after another, the sense of standing further behind his own eyes, letting the glow of the screen strike him. Somewhere, the colors kept changing: red watered down into blue, blue burning through his lids.

The shape in him moved back a few paces, then further into the open ground behind him, where nothing in the room could reach.

When Xie Lian stirred, it was enough to bring Hua Cheng

forward again.

Not tonight, gege, he thought. *I'll tell you another time.*

He leaned back and matched his breathing to Xie Lian's.

The Humvee’s AC had coughed its last somewhere outside Kandahar. After that it was just engine heat folding back into an oven on wheels grinding over washboard road. Hua Cheng sat wedged on the rear bench, left knee kissed by the med kit, right by the rifle stock whenever the driver clipped a rut. Dog tags stuck to his chest along with talc-fine dust. A strip of sun burned his wrist where his glove didn’t reach, right above the cheap rubber band he used to keep his cigarette pack from exploding at altitude.

"Come on, Wu Ming. “Pelican was gnawing on a half-eaten MRE spoon. "Show us that picture from when you were a private. You keep dodging every time we ask."

“Yeah, we’ve all seen each other’s baby photos,” Vegas added, rescuing a warm Coke rolling under their boots. "Fair's fair."

"Nah," Printer called from the passenger seat. "He's embarrassed because he looked like he was twelve years old."

Hua Cheng took a drag from his cigarette. "Fine." He fished a photo from a worn wallet. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

The picture made its way glove to glove. Vegas looked first and cracked. “Holy shit. No fucking way you were old enough to join the military.”

“You look like someone’s kid brother who snuck into the recruiting office,” Pelican said.

“Dead serious question.” Printer angled the photo to the dash light. “How the hell did you get past the recruiters?”

“Maybe he’s one of those baby-faced types,” Vegas said. “My cousin looked twelve until he was thirty.”

“Nah, nah. I’m telling you, this motherfucker lied about his age to get in. Probably forged his birth certificate too.”

“You’re not wrong,” Hua Cheng said, smirking.

“Wait, what?” Pelican nearly choked. “Are you serious?”

“Dead serious.” Hua Cheng pinched ash into a tray folded from an MRE entrée lid, the foil edges crimped. The Humvee hit a ripple and ash skittered away. “I was sixteen when I enlisted and had to get creative with the paperwork.”

Vegas whistled low. "Dude, why the hell would you admit that?“

“What are they going to do, discharge me after footing my med school bill?” Hua Cheng drew again and shrugged. “Be serious. I’m government property at this point. You bucket heads know how many zeros are on that?”

Pelican slapped Hua Cheng’s shoulder. Their driver, too, shook his head and grinned in the rearview mirror.

“You crazy bastard,” Pelican wheezed, spoon pinched between his front teeth. “We’re sweating getting written up for uniform violations and you’re out here admitting to federal fraud.”

“Speaking of violations,” Vegas said. “Aren’t you supposed to be Mr. Clean Living being a doctor and all that?”

“Everyone has one vice,” Hua Cheng said.

“Hey, did you guys hear much about that COVID stuff back home?” Pelican asked, checking his phone out of reflex. No signal. “My mom’s been sending me these novel-length emails.”

Vegas snorted. “My sister’s at a hospital in California. Says it’s a shitshow. People hoarding toilet paper like its gold.”

“Yeah, I saw an article that said it was some neurosurgeon’s fault it spun out of control,” Printer added, adjusting his chin strap with his thumb. The helmet left a wet crescent on his forehead. “Some Chinese doctor in Wuhan who covered it up or something. Made the whole thing worse.”

Hua Cheng tongued the smoke behind his teeth, mildly

curious. "What happened to him?"

“Who knows? Probably disappeared into some government black site.” Printer shrugged. “You know how it is over there.”

“Dude, can we not talk disease while we’re sitting in this petri dish?” Pelican gestured around the metal womb that had been baking them for hours. “I’m already convinced I’m gonna catch something from Vegas’s sock smell.”

"Fuck you, my socks are pristine," Vegas shot back.

“Pristine? Brother…” the driver said. The road threw them up a half inch over a bump. “I can smell them from up here.”

“At least I change mine,” Vegas said. “Printer’s been wearing the same pair since we left the wire.”

"That's not true.” Printer lifted a boot as if to prove it. "I turned them inside out yesterday. That counts."

Hua Cheng shook his head, grinning. "You're all disgusting."

“Says the guy who ate that questionable chicken last week,” Pelican pointed out.

"I have an iron stomach."

"You have a death wish and are easily the weirdest motherfucker in this whole unit."

Hua Cheng tipped his head and raised a brow, the chinstrap rubbing hot under his jaw. “Weird? Nah.”

"Dude, you literally have two different colored eyes," Pelican leaned close and squinted. "One's brown, the other's like... what is that, amber? Looks almost red in the right light." He made the sign of the cross over his chest. “Sometimes I think you got the devil in you, Wu Ming. Those eyes are unnatural.”

"It's called heterochromia, you superstitious idiots.”

"That's what someone possessed by the devil would say." Vegas popped an MRE peanut butter packet like a stress blister. “Plus you smoke like a chimney, never get sick, and you’re too calm when people are bleeding all over you. Normal people flinch when they see tib-fib through skin.”

“Getting squeamish around blood is counterproductive to being a doctor,” Hua Cheng said.

“See? Weird,” the driver said, a hand off the wheel to gesture. The Humvee lurched and his hand flew back to the “oh shit” position. “Who the hell wants to cut people open for a living?”

Printer snorted. "You're all idiots. Wu Ming's eyes are badass. Makes him look like some ancient warrior or something." He leaned around the seat, helmet bumping the frame. “Why ‘Wu Ming’ for a nickname, by the way?”

“Trade me.” Hua Cheng said. “How'd you all get yours?"

Pelican's face split into a wicked grin. "Oh, Vegas is easy. Lost his entire care-package candy stash betting on push-up contests. Kid thought he was Schwarzenegger. Skittles, Starbursts, the good jerky. Poof. House took it all.”

“House being me,” the driver said.

“I still don’t know how you thought you were taking him in push-ups. The man’s tits hit the ground before his arms bend.”

"Fuck you guys," Vegas said, but he was laughing. "At least I don't eat everything I can get my mouth on including plastic."

"I don't wanna hear it,” Pelican said, teething his spoon.

“Pelican’ll eat anything. Kebab that looks like it still has a heartbeat? Down the hatch. MRE cheese spread dated the Bush administration? It’s ‘vintage.’ You’re about as bad as Wu Ming, dude.”

Hua Cheng raised an eyebrow. "And Printer?"

"Moron got his nickname all the way back in basic training. Kid says ‘copy’ to everything. On net, off net, didn’t matter. Drill Sergeant: ‘Are those boots broken in?’—‘Copy.’ ‘You want a moment to pray?’—‘Copy, sir.’

"It's a dumb nickname," Printer muttered, sinking into his seat.

“What about you, then?” Vegas tipped the Coke.

“Yeah, Doc. Spill.”

“It’s stupid too,” Hua Cheng said. “I wrote up a report on an equipment issue and typed ‘Anonymous’ in the name line.”

Vegas lifted his brows. “And?”

“And my auto-signature was turned on. Full block. Rank, name, duty position. ‘—Hua Cheng.’”

“So you narc’ed anonymously and signed it.”

"I got called out in front of the whole platoon,” Hua Cheng said. “'Well well, looks like our anonymous whistleblower forgot how anonymity works.' The sergeant was from mainland China, so he started calling me Wu Ming."

"Wu Ming?" Printer asked.

"It means nameless," Hua Cheng explained.

The driver shook his head. "So you got your nickname by being too honest for your own good."

Hua Cheng stubbed out his cigarette. "Turns out I'm shit at being sneaky."

The driver rolled his shoulders against the seat, eyes on the road. “ANA up ahead. Chain across. Red crescent flag.”

They all instinctively leaned. Two dusty trucks blocked the lane, grill to grill, a chain sagging between oil drums. A white panel with a red crescent hung from one truck's antenna, faded to pink at the edges. A guy in an ANA blouse over Adidas pants waved a green paddle, flipped it to red.

"I got eyes," Printer said. "PID. Under flag."

They rolled. The Humvee's fan coughed hot air. Hua Cheng folded up his makeshift ash tray and stuffed it into his pocket. He didn't think anything of the checkpoint beyond what it was.

Suddenly, with a shove, it was as though an enormous hand tossed the Humvee. The explosive concussion punched through Hua Cheng's chest and out his ears; sound came back as a high keening, then the strobe of a thousand small noises, glass pebbling into their laps. They rolled once, twice, and slammed to a stop on the driver's side.

Breathe. He did. Dust went in with the air.

"Sound off," he called. His voice sounded far away and inside his mouth at the same time.

"Driver up—green," the driver rasped, upside down in his harness.

"TC up—green," Printer coughed, spitting pink. "Bit my tongue."

"Rear left—yellow, wrist," Pelican said. "Bleeding."

"Rear right—yellow, ankle," Vegas said. "Twisted, but I'm moving."

"Rear center—green," Hua Cheng said. "On you. Rollover drill. Egress right. Use the high-side door."

The passenger door was up where a ceiling should be. Vegas braced his boots on the roof-turned-floor and shoved at the handle. It groaned, moved a fraction, then stopped. Pelican wedged a

shoulder under it and pushed. “It’s stuck on the frame.”

“Hook knife,” Hua Cheng called. Printer had already cut his own belt and handed the blade over. Hua Cheng reached up and sawed through Pelican’s strap, then Vegas’s.

“No fire,” the driver warned. “They’re under flag. Hands if they’re on us.”

“Bas! Dasta bala!” a voice snapped inches beyond the opening. *(Hands up.)*

Hua Cheng slid on his elbows toward the rear window; he swept a sleeve to clear glass and pushed through into the sun. The smooth-worn buttstock of a rifle came from his blind side and struck his cheekbone. Hands took his vest strap and hauled him upward. He had time for one thought: *don’t drag me over the glass.* Light narrowed to a pin. Then it went.

***

The paint wasn’t white so much as a kind of slightly yellowed old tooth. Up close, you could see where a hair had been painted over and fossilized into the wall. The surgeon break room vent threw cold down the wall like water against a rock and slid into Hua Cheng’s collar. Still, his skin was hot.

His phone rang, pulling him back into himself. He picked up on the second chime.

“Gege?” He rubbed his thumb across his lower lip just to feel it. "Sorry, I was..." What had he been doing? Losing time again.

"San Lang, thank god." Xie Lian sounded breathless and frustrated in a way Hua Cheng had never heard. "My landlord just called with the most ridiculous—no, you know what? It's not ridiculous, it's completely predictable. My refrigerator fell through the floor."

"What?"

“Fell through the floor. Apparently there were termites eating the support beams under my kitchen and it gave in. It crashed straight through into Mrs. Chen's apartment downstairs."

“Are you hurt?”

"No, I wasn't home, thank god. But Mrs. Chen was making soup dumplings and apparently my refrigerator landed exactly where her kitchen table used to be. She's fine—she was at the stove—but her ceiling is completely destroyed and my apartment..." Xie Lian made a sound somewhere between a laugh and a sob. "There's a hole in my kitchen floor big enough to drive a car through."

Hua Cheng stood, reaching for his wallet. "Where are you now?"

"Standing in the hallway with my landlord, two insurance adjusters, and a very unhappy elderly woman who's been yelling at me for the past hour." Raised voices carried through the phone. "And you know what the best part is? I've been asking my landlord to get a pest inspection for eight months. Eight months, San Lang. I told him I could hear things in the walls and floors, but apparently termite treatment wasn't in the budget."

Hua Cheng tried not to smirk. "Gege's fired up today."

"I am fired up!" Xie Lian's voice pitched high. "My entire kitchen just became a skylight!”

"Don't worry. We'll figure it out."

"The landlord says it could be weeks before it's habitable again. Something about structural engineers and permit applications and—San Lang, I can see Mrs. Chen's fish tank through my floor. There's a pufferfish staring at me through the hole."

“Gege.”

“Yeah?”

“Why don’t you drop your lease?”

There was a long pause. In the background, Hua Cheng could hear rapid-fire Mandarin, then Xie Lian replying—*(Yes, Mrs. Chen, I know this is terrible. I'll take care of it)*—his vowels rounded and softer than those around him.

"Drop my lease?" Xie Lian repeated, his attention back.

"You basically live with me anyway," Hua Cheng said. "Half your clothes are in my laundry. Why don't you drop your lease? How much are you paying for the privilege of termite roommates?"

Xie Lian giggled; he moved the phone to his other shoulder, sweater prickling the speaker with soft static.

"Would gege indulge me in this?"

Hua Cheng could feel Xie Lian smile through the phone. A long sigh, then: "San Lang does make a good point…"

"Then pack whatever survived the Great Refrigerator Disaster. I'll meet you to help move the rest of your stuff."

***

"San Lang," Xie Lian breathed, spotting Hua Cheng coming up the stairs.

Hua Cheng didn't say anything, just pulled him into his arms and kissed his forehead. Xie Lian melted as he buried his face in Hua Cheng's chest.

"Thank you," he mumbled, taking a deep, exhausted breath. "Long day."

Hua Cheng laughed, one hand smoothing Xie Lian's back. "Of course, gege."

Behind, the insurance adjusters were still taking measurements and making notes on clipboards. Mrs. Chen had retreated to her apartment, but the sound of aggressive pot-clanging bounced up through the hole in Xie Lian's kitchen floor.

"Show me the damage," Hua Cheng said, keeping one arm around his waist.

They stepped into the apartment, and Hua Cheng had to admit, Xie Lian hadn't been exaggerating. The hole was impressive, roughly four feet wide and stretching from where the refrigerator used to sit all the way to the kitchen sink. Jagged floorboards made a toothy pit straight down into a kitchen below.

Hua Cheng approached the edge. "Wow. There really is a puffer fish looking up at us."

"I told you."

"He's probably wondering why his ceiling is gone."

"Mrs. Chen says his name is Bao Bao and that he's very sensitive to loud noises," Xie Lian said, as if entering it on a charge sheet, and threw some shirts into a duffel bag.

"Well, we can't have that. What do you want to take first?"

It struck Hua Cheng how little Xie Lian kept here beyond the basics: a few changes of clothes, toiletries. Most of his life had migrated to Hua Cheng's apartment without either of them planning it, though there hadn't been much to begin with either. Xie Lian pulled something from beneath a folded sweater. He frowned at whatever he was holding, then wrapped it carefully in a shirt at the bottom of his bag.

"Textbooks next?" Hua Cheng crouched by the makeshift bookcase.

Xie Lian nodded. English titles shouldered up against Chinese, their edges furred with sticky notes that fluttered like molted wings. He touched each as if to check their life, then stacked them for Hua Cheng to ferry.

"It seems gege has no hobbies other than his old textbooks." Hua Cheng slipped two hardbacks under one arm and a coiled extension cord under the other.

Offended, perhaps, Xie Lian said, “I have a bamboo,” and went to rescue it from the windowsill.

The lucky bamboo had outgrown its first life and was living a second in a chipped ramen bowl. He tilted the bowl; water lapped his knuckles, and the green cane leaned.

Hua Cheng bent to wrestle the old air mattress, limp vinyl belly rasping against the floor like a beached thing. "I'll miss your air mattress, gege. It's a shame we never got to properly test it out."

Xie Lian went red so fast it was audible: a little breath sucking back between his teeth. "San Lang!" He smacked Hua Cheng's shoulder with the back of his hand.

***

Hua Cheng’s apartment inhaled them. By the time the last box thumped down and the door shut behind it, the day was brined and tender. Xie Lian peeled off toward the kitchenette on reflex. Light switch click, cupboard breath, the metal pop of a spoon from the drawer for a half-finished jar of peanut butter.

On the other side of the room, Hua Cheng performed a small, theatrical death onto the couch, a long, operatic groan as his keys skittered across the coffee table. Xie Lian laughed and nudged his shoes off with the backs of his heels. He curled up across from Hua Cheng and tucked cold toes under his thighs. Hua Cheng’s head dangled off the edge of the couch; Xie Lian could see only the bottom curve of his smile.

“Gege, your feet are frigid.”

"Then warm them up for me.”

Xie Lian shimmied. He twisted the peanut butter lid; it gave that soft, rubbery pop, and he scooped a spoonful. The smell went warm and sweet-salty, filling the small room faster than the air conditioner could thin it.

“As His Highness requests.” Hua Cheng freed one foot from

under his thigh, massaging his thumbs into its arch.

Xie Lian hummed around the spoon, cheeks hollowing. A smear of peanut butter glistened at the corner of his mouth.

“Now that you’re *officially* moving in,” Hua Cheng said, “we should buy something that makes this place yours too.”

Xie Lian glanced at the neat piles of himself. Two boxes, a bag, and a plant. He made an uncertain sound. “But I have my bamboo.”

“No, no, gege—something else.” Hua Cheng hummed, faux-thoughtful. He fished his phone from his pocket with one hand while the other continued smoothing out Xie Lian’s arch. “Anything you want. It could be curtains for all I care.”

Xie Lian giggled, a helpless burst that made his shoulders jump. “Yes. I most definitely need curtains.” He stole the phone from Hua Cheng’s hand with a dexterous little twist. Blue light lifted his lashes as he opened to a furniture store’s website. “Oh, look,” he joked, tapping a pair of gauzy panels. “These are perfect.” He scrolled to the price and tried to stifle his laugh. “San Lang. They want this much for fabric?”

Hua Cheng craned his neck. “That’s extortion. There’s no universe where anyone should pay that much for curtains. What brand is this anyway?” He took the phone back and flicked down to the product details: Ruoye. “I’ve never heard of them before.”

Xie Lian threw his shoulders into a shrug; he licked the back of the spoon clean. “Me neither.”

Hua Cheng's attention drifted sideways. Xie Lian's turtleneck had ridden up slightly, and the cream-colored wool kissed his skin pink.

“You know, gege looks very good in turtlenecks.”